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ISSUE 133

So Sony fired first. We have everything from the big PlayStation 4 unveiling in New York in this issue. Everything, that is, except an image of the new console and a price. Despite showing off nine next-generation PlayStation games – including the mightily impressive *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, *DriveClub* and *Watch Dogs* – and wowing the world's videogames media with some very impressive tech demos, it's the console no-show that stole the mainstream news headlines.

The lesson here is that while gamers can get excited by a dual-camera, DualShock 4 controller, 8GB of RAM and supercharged PC architecture, your average Joe on the street really needs to see what that hunk of plastic and silicon chips looks like on the outside.

So was this a shot in the foot for Sony? Far from it. It's got the world talking about the PlayStation brand again, hitting all major news outlets – and when Microsoft brings out the New Xbox guns, Sony can throw in the PlayStation 4 console photo grenade.

The next-gen console war has finally begun – your move, Microsoft.

Nick Roberts

Nick Roberts
EDITOR IN CHIEF







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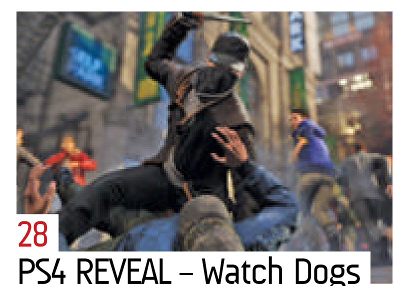


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PLAYSTATION



ON 20 FEBRUARY 2013, Sony introduced the world to the next generation of videogames. Sony Computer Entertainment president and group CEO Andrew House took to the stage at the Hammerstein Ballroom at Manhattan Centre Studios in New York to an audience of over three million, and revealed Sony's "most powerful platform ever" and finally gave us a "glimpse into the future of play."

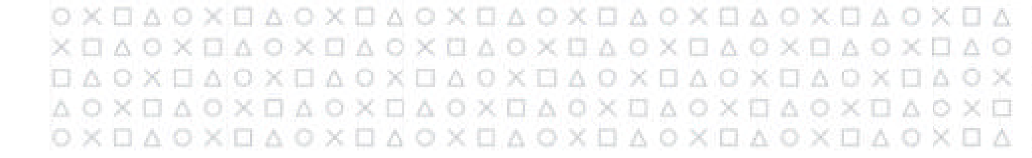
The PlayStation 4 puts an end to the longest console cycle in the history of videogames and opens a bright new chapter, leading us into the eighth – and potentially final – generation of home consoles. The stakes were high for Sony going into the PlayStation Meeting 2013. The state of the games industry isn't what it

4 REVEALED



was eight years ago; and after a recession and a rise in mobile, touch and motion platforms, this is a time of faster and more aggressive change than any other point in our demanding industry's timeline.

The rise of open platforms such as Ouya, handheld gaming with iOS devices and even the changing landscape of internet broadband speeds are changing the way people play, interact and purchase videogames like never before. Launching a new home console does not guarantee renewed success, and with many gamers still satisfied with current-gen systems, Sony has taken a big risk coming out of the gates first. Is the PlayStation 4 up to the challenge of ushering into the future?



The lead up to the PlayStation Meeting was a tense affair. Sony had teased the event for weeks, slowly reminding us of what made the brand so fantastic to begin with.

A series of documentaries were released, reminding the world what the PlayStation had brought us; incredible worlds, astounding experiences, an unimaginable flow of untapped potential – and the PlayStation Move. The leaks were coming in hot, some turned out to be incredibly accurate, and others wildly missed the mark, but the conversation has been solidly centred on the company and what it would have to do to launch a successful console in this difficult market.

In the face of so much adversity then, the question became this: how is Sony going to define itself in the next generation?

In the end, it was simple. If the PlayStation Meeting revealed anything, it's that 2013 is going to be the most exciting time for gamers in almost a decade. The PlayStation 4 has been revealed – and it is more than we dared to dream was possible.

From the off, Sony revealed a shift in attitude. No longer simply occupied with pumping out raw power, nor being the centre of the living room experience; the PlayStation 4 is putting itself at the centre of the player's world.

"The living room is no longer the centre of the PlayStation ecosystem. The gamer is," said Andrew House. It was a point the team was eager to impose upon the crowd, with lead PS4 system architect Mark Cerny later declaring, "We wanted to make sure nothing would come between the player, the platform and play... Our main goal was to architect the system so as to support a breadth of experiences."

At the heart of these experiences then is the DualShock 4 controller. Let's address the elephant in the room; Sony elected to keep the box itself behind closed doors, and for good reason. It's just a box. One of the most striking things about the PlayStation reveal was how many playbooks Sony is borrowing from. It shrouded the hardware in visual secrecy much like Apple, and most importantly, took a step in Nintendo's direction by putting the power of their new machine into the player's hands.

The DualShock 4 conveys all you need to know about the PlayStation 4 and Sony's exciting new attitude. It retains the iconic look and feel that you expect from the brand, while including a host of wildly exciting new features. The DualShock 4 comes equipped with a micro-touchpad, not dissimilar to the one adorned on the rear of a PlayStation Vita – giving us unparalleled control over menus and introducing new ways to explore games, like Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*... alas, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The most integral feature, and the one that defines Sony's new era of console gaming, is the Share button. Situated at the top of the controller, it allows gamers to seamlessly connect with an audience around the world. The button is a gateway to an unparalleled connectivity between players.

Pressing the Share button while playing a game will allow players to capture video and screenshots and broadcast them to the world. Just hit the button, select the play you wish to capture and the system will handle the rest; uploading in the background onto platforms like Facebook, Ustream and Twitter while you continue to play. The PlayStation Network also reportedly supports the ability to browse live video feed from your friends; looking over their shoulder as they play, with the ability to post comments directly onto their screens. You'll even be able to invite friends to take over your controller virtually to help complete difficult sections if you can't beat them yourself. If it works like Sony seem to think it will, it represents a huge step forward for user-generated content and interconnectivity.

All this comes from Sony's partnership with Gaikai, the cloud gaming service it acquired in 2012

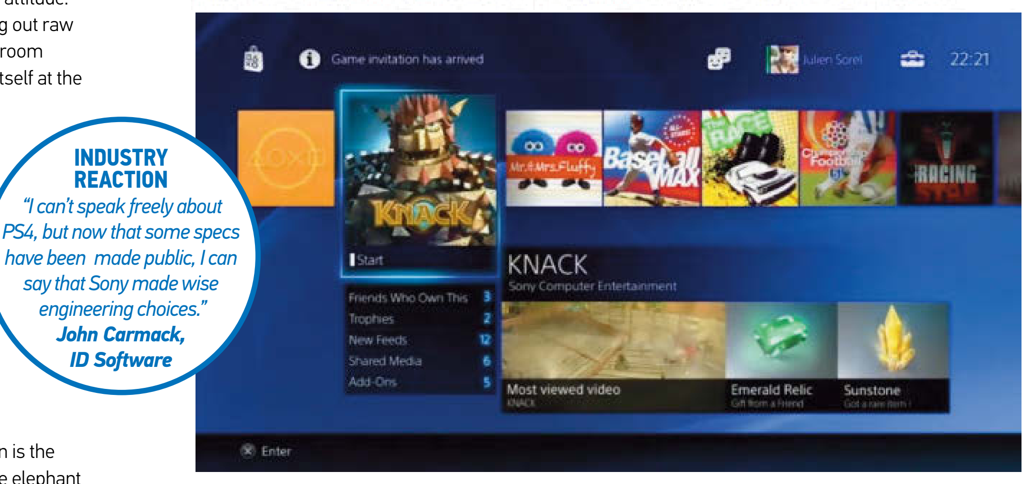
READER COMMENT

"When the great David Cage showed me an old man's face moving a little bit I understood his Philosophy. I saw a soul. I saw God"
Robert Florence

INDUSTRY REACTION

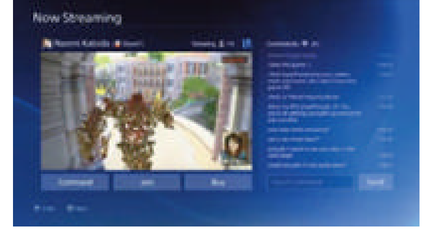
"I can't speak freely about PS4, but now that some specs have been made public, I can say that Sony made wise engineering choices."
John Carmack, ID Software

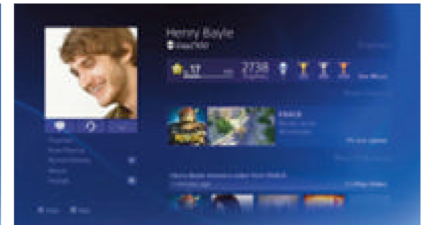
"We wanted to make sure nothing would come between the player, the platform and play"



PERSONALISATION

"This system is very much aware of the player and what is going on in the room," claimed a demo video at the PlayStation Meeting. The PS4 and new PlayStation Network is designed to give you exactly what you want; with the store constantly collecting data on what games you enjoy and dislike, it will eventually begin to tailor the store to your tastes. Sony says a long-term goal is for the store to pre-download games it thinks you'll be interested in, straight onto your hard drive.





UPDATING A DESIGN 16 YEARS IN THE MAKING

First introduced late into 1997 with the PlayStation system, the DualShock design has gone relatively unchanged over the past 16 years. It speaks volumes that the DualShock 4 controller is how Sony chose to reveal its brand new vision for the future of gaming; boasting an iconic design with a handful of new features that might just change the way we play forever



OPTIONS

△×○□ ONE FACET of the original DualShock design that has been ousted are the Start and Select buttons. Whenever someone unexpectedly knocked at the door or the smell of burning food began to flood the hallways of the house, the Start/pause button became our best friend in the world. It's good news then, that the Start and Select buttons have been rolled into one easy to locate Options button located at the top of the pad.

LIGHTBAR

△×○□ ATOP THE DualShock controller is a three-colour LED bar, though it's far more than just a pleasing aesthetic option. While we assume the light bar is used to connect the controller to the PlayStation EYE camera to track control and 3D movement, it will also convey useful information to the player, such as damage taken in-game and act as a low battery indicator. We suspect local multiplayer sessions will now be identified by colour as opposed to numerically as in previous generations.

SHARE BUTTON

△×○□ PERHAPS THE most important addition to the new DualShock controller, the Share button represents Sony's bold new vision of the future of play. With a simple press of the button you'll be able to capture screens, video – you name it – on the fly without any cumbersome menus or lengthy processing time. The captured media can then be uploaded online instantly, including support with social media sites such as Facebook, Ustream and Twitter.

TOUCHPAD

△×○□ THE DUALSHOCK 4 controller is utilising a small two-inch touchpad positioned front and centre, not dissimilar in function to that of the one found on the rear of the PlayStation Vita. During an Unreal Engine 4 demonstration, it was noted that the camera could be controlled via the touchpad, though other gameplay functionality will surely be implemented by time we get our hands on it. We expect to be able to do everything from swiftly navigating menus, to quick reloading and gear shifts. The Quick-Time Event is about to get a new lease on life.

FAMILIARITY

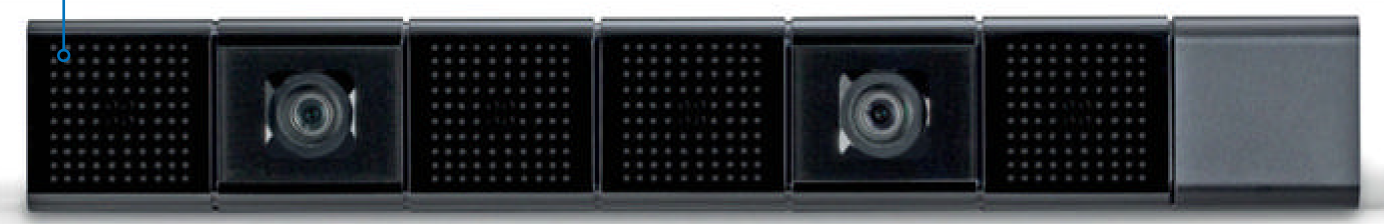
△×○□ IT'S NOT all change. Returning with the iconic design are of course the four greatest symbols of all time – the familiar symbols return, reminding us of the lasting legacy of the DualShock controller. While Sony has been eager to redesign many facets of the controller, there was never any doubt in our mind that these would continue to guide forgetful gamers to the accelerator, for example. The controller also sports a familiar D-pad design, more responsive shoulder triggers and thankfully, enhanced rumble capabilities as standard.

SOUND

△×○□ WHILE THE PlayStation 3 accepting any Bluetooth headsets as a standard was a nice idea, in execution it fell flat. Gamers had no easy way to communicate; mobile phones stopped coming with Bluetooth headsets in the early Noughties, after all. PlayStation multiplayer servers were often silent, a stark contrast to those found over in Microsoft's vast network of Live players. Thankfully, the DualShock 4 not only has a 3.5mm jack built into the hardware, Sony is also bundling in a mono headset in with the console. Time to brush up on your smack talk.

MOVE IT

△×○□ **With the new PlayStation EYE camera, standard with every machine, able to track 3D movement and depth – the return of Move has us intrigued. Media Molecule demonstrated a tech demo that used Move as a free-form sculpting tool in a world of clay, with the studio calling naming the PS4 the "creative console". While it looks pretty, like most tech demos (and anything Move related) we question whether it would actually work.**



for $380 million. "What we're creating is the fastest, most powerful network for gaming in the world," said Dave Perry, CEO of Gaikai, claiming that the Share functionality is the foundation to "the first social gaming network with meaning."

Using Gaikai cloud service and the exciting new PlayStation 4 network, you'll be able to "instantly experience anything you want," Perry claimed, ushering in the next phase of Sony's exciting new plans. "Pay only for the games that you fall in love with."

But Sony isn't abandoning the Blu-ray entirely; in fact it has already confirmed that not only are discs still a big part of the company's strategy, but there is also zero intention of restricting the use of second hand games. It's welcome news, despite Sony's assertion that the cost of next-gen games will remain the same as its current pricing models.

Sony's new digital strategy is an exciting step forward towards a digital future. With such a reliance on streaming, there is a worry that broadband speeds aren't up to the task, but Sony is confident this will work – promising that gamers will in fact be able to begin playing a game as soon as they've purchased it. It's not a completely foreign concept; Blizzard Entertainment's games have utilised this for years now, with the game launching in a lowered performance state, gradually increasing to its maximum optimisation as the download continues in the background. It's certainly interesting to see this parallel, considering the "strategic partnership" between the two parties in recent years.

Despite the eight years between console generations, the jump graphically isn't likely to be as noticeable as it was between PS2 and PS3 in the wake of the HD era. In fact Sony has already ruled out the possibility of 'Ultra HD' 4K televisions being used for videogaming with the system. That's why it's the little things that count this time around. We are looking forward to smoother game experiences, bigger worlds and most importantly, the death of load times. That's a promise Sony is making with the console itself.

> "What we're creating is the fastest, most powerful network for gaming in the world"

The PlayStation 4's architecture will allow players to suspend and resume a gaming session with a press of the PS button located on the DualShock 4 controller. The goal is to eliminate the barriers between the immediate desire to play and the ability to play – a complete 180 from the patch-heavy nightmare that haunted PlayStation 3 gamers.

It might seem strange that we've talked about the PlayStation 4 for all this time without mentioning the hardware itself, but really it's the revolutionary implementation of Gaikai's cloud streaming service and the repositioning of the player at the centre of the experience that is most exciting.Still, Sony's hardware promises show a company that has learnt from its past mistakes.

The PlayStation 3 was historically difficult to develop for, with studios around the world struggling to do even the simplest tasks – such as port DLC or have games run at a respectable frame-rate. The PlayStation 4 is set to change everything, described as having a supercharged PC architecture, Sony is removing the barriers its predecessor erected in front of developers and lets them explore the system to create the greatest games imaginable.

INDUSTRY REACTION

"Thanks for the great event in NY @playstation – Very pleased with the commitment to 8GB of GDDR5 memory. Other specs are beautiful too!"
Randy Pitchford, Gearbox



VITA U

△×○□ **While Sony has played with the idea of Remote Play, the function of playing games between its systems, it has never been fully realised. Until now. Sony has plans to make the PS Vita the ultimate companion to the PS4; using Remote Play, gamers will be able to pause a game, transfer it to the handheld and resume play from precisely where they were over a Wi-Fi connection. It works in reverse too, so with Gaikai's Dave Perry claiming the "long term goal is to make every PS4 title playable on the Vita," it looks like Sony may have just made Nintendo's Wii U obsolete.**



PLAYSTATION 4: *Your questions answered*

So what's the price of this thing?

Sony elected not to reveal the price of its new gaming system. While rumours put it into the $399 ballpark, there's still no concrete guarantee. It isn't likely we will get one anytime soon either, what with E3 being still a few months away.

No hardware? No price? What about a release date?

Sadly, Sony is playing its cards close to its chest with this one as well. At the end of the PlayStation Meeting presentation a slide flashed across the screen declaring the console would be available "Holiday 2013". It was never referenced on stage, though all signs point to a November release ahead of Christmas, in Japan and North America at least.

Will the PS4 have backwards compatibility?

Due to the difference in architecture between the PS4 and its predecessors, it will not be possible to play PSX, PS2 or PS3 games through the console's optical media drive. However, Sony has announced that it is looking to bring full backwards compatibility support via Gaikai's cloud streaming service – eventually.

Will Gaikai's streaming really work?

Sony has since come forward following the PS4 announcement addressing this concern. While they wouldn't give specifics, many of the streaming services showcased are actually planned to be implemented later in the console cycle. Considering the issues Sony faced in getting the PlayStation Meeting livestream running, we aren't holding our breath.

How powerful is the PlayStation 4?

Sony is claming that the PS4 is its "most powerful platform ever" boasting over 8GB of high-speed unified system memory and a GPU capable of delivering 1.84 TeraFLOPS of processing power. In reality, this equates to a GPU 4.5 times more powerful than that of the PS3's. Expect games to run exceptionally smoothly.

Is the Eye Toy really back?

The Eye Toy is back; though this time it's wearing the skin of Microsoft's Kinect. Acting as a hub for so much more than caring for virtual animals, the new Eye camera will be able to track 3D movement and depth in real time, and it's all thanks to that light bar atop the DualShock 4.

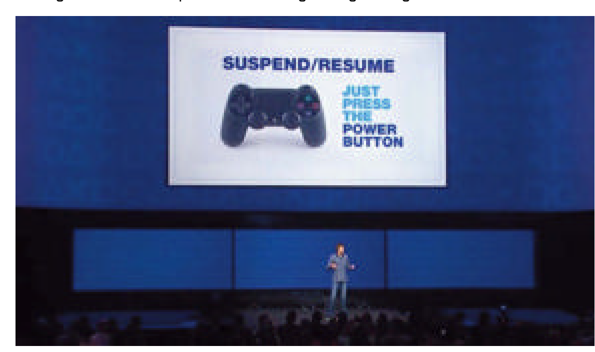
Is Sony really looking to block secondhand games?

While we wouldn't be surprised if Sony and every other publisher in the world is currently trying to find a way to properly mediate the issue, Sony has confirmed that the PlayStation 4 comes fully equipped with a Blu-ray drive with the capacity to play both new and second hand retail games.

Will my PSN/SEN account transfer across?

It's hard to say at this early stage. Sony has never had an online infrastructure to port between systems – so this could be a steep learning curve for the company. Of course, if the accounts aren't transferable, players would be waving goodbye to their collection of trophies and friends lists. While unconfirmed, we expect Sony to put a lot of effort into getting this running from launch.

The PlayStation 4 will supposedly do away with lengthy load times, with the machine shutting down into a low power state to let gamers get straight back into the action.



The developers are off to a pretty great head start, as you'll see over the following pages of **games™**. Sony's first-party developers Guerrilla Games, Evolution, Sucker Punch and Sony Japan have created some incredible content utilising the new consoles array of features – and the third-party developers haven't done a bad job either, revealing some rather exciting content. Blizzard Entertainment, Bungie, Capcom, Square Enix, Ubisoft and interestingly, Jonathan Blow, are just some of the developers that have helped to open our minds to Sony's brave new vision for the future of gaming.

The PlayStation 4 has a lot to prove, but Sony's plans reveal a strong determination to drive this console into the core of the play experience, with a focus on fun and connectivity. Sony wants content to be made available conveniently and immediately to players. It wants players to connect with friends old and new across the globe and most importantly, it represents a company that is ready to tackle the difficulties of the industry head on. The PlayStation 4 will be available "Holiday 2013". We can't wait.

READER COMMENT

"Quite tight on major details, Gaikai use was bit obvious and controller could very well change… Boomerang? Anyone?"
Frank Rockall



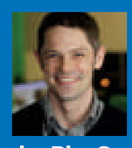
SMARTERGLASS

If Sony weren't satisfied with already making Xbox Live look like child's play, its vision for iOS and Android integration could stop SmartGlass dead in its tracks. The PlayStation App will enable players to supplement their console experience with useful features such as displaying maps, inventory screens and of course, access to the PlayStation store while on the move. While developer Evolution hinted that *DriveClub* would utilise such an app to give players "24/7 untethered access to their club".



USHERING IN THE FUTURE

△✕○□ Following the PlayStation Meeting, **games™** sat down with PlayStation UK boss Fergal Gara in New York to talk about the exciting announcement of the PlayStation 4 and what the future holds for Sony



How do you measure the success of an announcement that's as big as the PlayStation 4?

Well, a couple of things. The first measure, which is really important, is does anybody give a damn and is it being talked about? I think on those measures, instantly, you have to give a massive tick in terms of trending on Twitter and so on and so forth; we were absolutely all over it.

If you looked at who covered it in terms of media – specialist and broad – the answer is everybody was interested. Everybody was commenting on it.

If you look at the detail of what they're saying, there's a mix of great excitement about the power of the games and the new experiences we're delivering. There's a bit of frustration that not every last detail was on the table last night, but let's not forget, we're not launching it next week.

So [we thought] let's focus on the experience we're bring to bring to people. Form factor and detail can come later; the look is important but it's certainly not the be all and end all.

Two of the major rumours going round prior to the announcement of Sony's next-generation console centred around always-online connections and the restriction of secondhand games. Now the PS4 announcement shows neither of those to be true, were either of those avenues ever explored?

Well, first of all, we haven't made a statement on the secondhand games question. There was a lot of reaction to a patent that was filed, which is a matter of course for a technology business like us – to file various patents at various times, many of which many never see any application, but they are good to have depending on ideas that might be building.

So what we're here to do is offer the best value and the best gaming experience for gamers. The answer to the pre-owned question isn't clarified just yet and we're working through that, and we'll announce our position in more detail as and when we can.

What do you see as PlayStation 4's major competition? There's Microsoft's next console, the resurgence of PC gaming and smartphone gaming is on the up…

It's a bit of all of those, you know? You're competing for people's share of time and share of wallet. You can put your smartphone and tablet into that space. Is it the same quality and experience? No. But does it compete for people's share of wallet and share of time? Yes.

Of course, we've got some core competitors who we expect will give us a run for our money, but we're absolutely delighted we've got our vision; we've stuck to our guns and we're able to share that with people now. We're excited about it and we'll carve our own foothold here.

The presentation touched on taking the PlayStation experience out of 'the tower' and moving it to mobile so PlayStation fans can take the experience with them. What is it Sony has seen or what trends has Sony spotted that makes it believe this is the right approach?

It simply comes back to how do our target audience lead their lives today. The answer is they're socially connected in a whole multitude of ways, and much as we might like to live in our little ivory tower and say they should only use our devices, that's neither reasonable nor realistic.

Devices are proliferating and [we're] using more of them than ever before. So you can see that as a bit of a problem or as a threat, or you can say look, let's embrace it. Your PlayStation life is now part of your broader social media life, so I think that's a big tick. It gives loads of benefits.

PlayStation Vita [also] plays an important role, I guess, in the broader integrated ecosystem. The things that will be possible on Vita will go above and beyond what will be possible on companion app stuff on iOS and Android because of its power and capability.

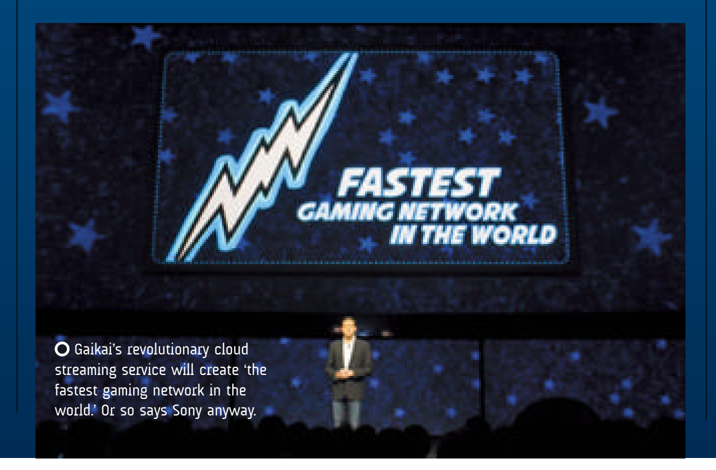
PlayStation 4 has been in the works for five years, and in the interim Nintendo released the Wii U. Was there any aspect of Wii U Sony looked at in detail, in terms of what worked and what didn't?

I haven't been involved in that depth of the development cycle here, but I think it's absolutely fair to assume that we watch each other quite closely. When Wii U was unveiled, were we looking? Were we interested? Of course we were.

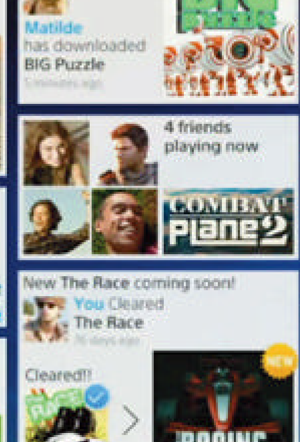
I think it's interesting that we chose to have maybe some of those ideas but do them very differently. Maybe that's a good thing. I think we more openly embraced other devices and other operating systems, and that was evident [at the meeting].

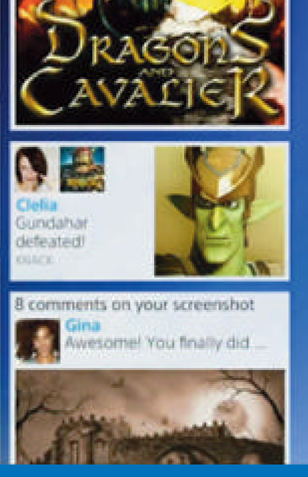
○ Over 150 developers have pledged to generate content for the PlayStation 4; in fact the list is so vast that it becomes difficult to find a publisher that *isn't* prepared to take on the next-generation.





○ Gaikai's revolutionary cloud streaming service will create 'the fastest gaming network in the world.' Or so says Sony anyway.





The PSN's interface has been completely redesigned, with the horrible cross-media bar replaced by a sleek, modern, Windows 8-inspired layout.



It looks like Sony has big plans for the cohesion between console and handheld gaming in the next generation. How important will PlayStation Vita be for PlayStation 4?
How important is it to PS4? I almost feel, in a way, it's how important is PlayStation 4 to PS Vita. I think the answer there is very. I think it was a big, big step for PS Vita, what was announced. We often use the adage PS Vita was aiming to be a PS3 in your pocket. What we saw [at the meeting] is actually more than that. It's a PS4 in your pocket.

Now that the PlayStation 4 has been announced, how does that affect Sony's PS Vita strategy?
It gives us another strength and, actually, our biggest challenge this year. We've got an absolutely tremendous console in PlayStation 3 with a fantastic software line-up for this year that in no way deserves to be ignored or neglected; we've got an incredible new machine just announced in PlayStation 4 and we've got the best ever handheld device that's been given another great boost in terms of what it can do. So balancing all of the messages of what our PlayStation family can do and what's most relevant to who is going to be a challenge that we've got some of the answers to, but more work to do.

You've shown the new PlayStation 4 controller, which utilises motion control. What lessons did you learn from the launch of Move, in terms of how it was received both by fans and developers?
My personal reflections on PlayStation Move are it's still, in my humble opinion, the best motion control system that's out there in terms of accuracy, etc. I do think we've been – and remain – a little lacking in terms of defining new experiences in a fresh and different way to make it realise its true sales potential. I thought we saw some stuff [at the meeting] as to how PlayStation Move in a PS4 environment could be exciting. Some concept work, admittedly, from Media Molecule, but highly creative and highly engaging, and funny in the way they do so, so well.

Clearly we majored on – well, not *completely* majored on – but we focused more on, I guess, core genres. Key genres for gamers because the really passionate gamers will be first in. Let's make no bones about it. So what kind of genres do they look for? Hardcore shooters are incredibly important. Having driving games is incredibly important. Having great third-party support is incredibly important. We lined up all of that.

When PlayStation 3 launched, the console war was about the exclusive, and as the generation wore on, it became just as important to have the definitive multiformat version of big IP – whether through having the most technically proficient version, exclusive downloadable content and so on. Given that trend, what do you see as being more important for PlayStation 4? Exclusive titles or the definitive versions of big multiformat games?
Yeah, good question. I think content will always matter. It's why it's essential to have first-party studios. For several reasons: one, to give you a launch line-up to cover the bases nicely, to be brave because not every decision is made on absolute pure commercial gain.

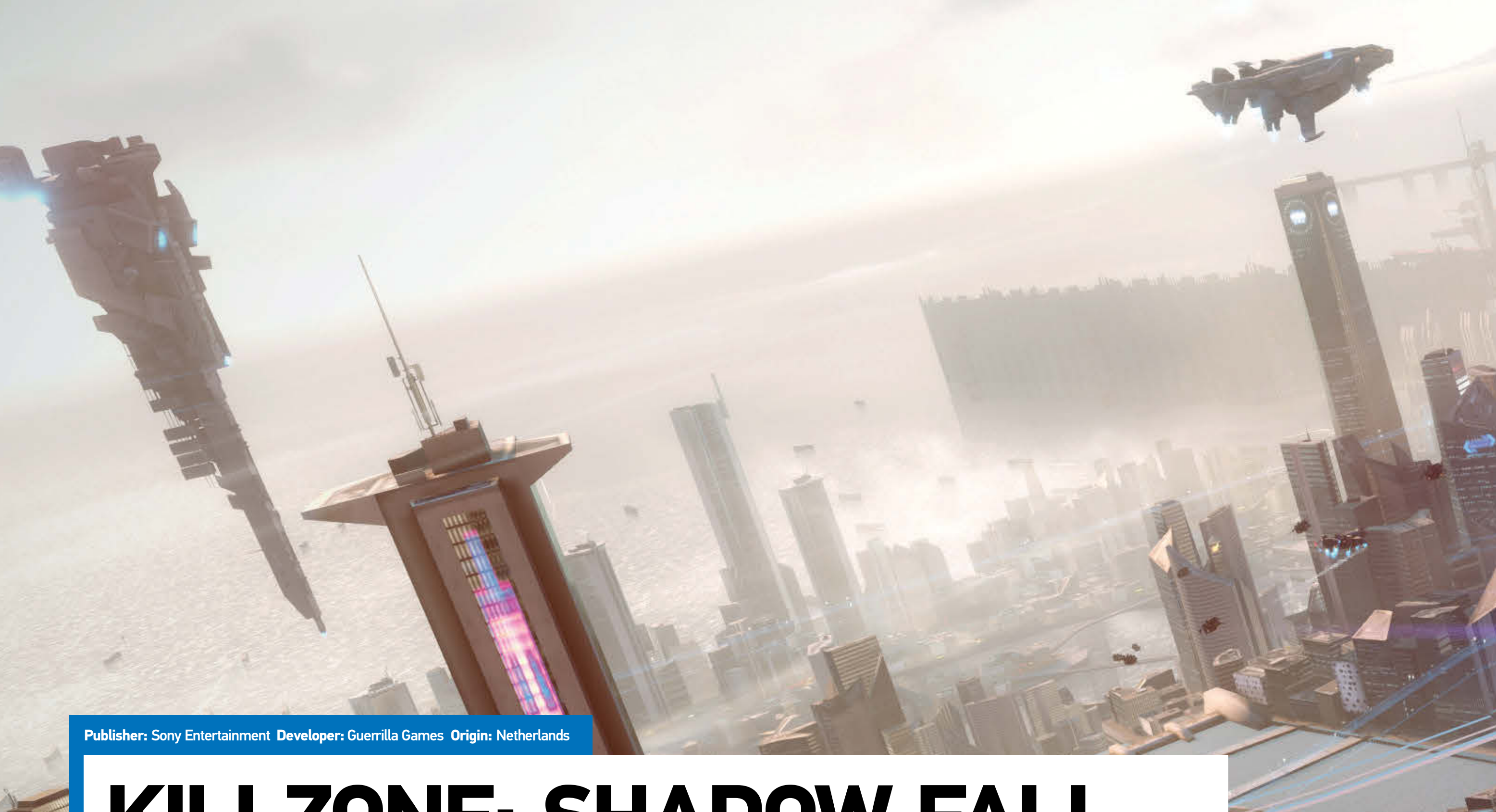
So the role of first-party exclusives I see as remaining important, and you know… we're delighted we've got a great first-party line-up in the bag and great publisher support. You saw the logos [at the meeting]. It was 'Can you see if one's missing?' you know? Rather than 'Who's in?'

> "I think content will always matter. It's why it's essential to have first-party studios"

So where does all this leave PlayStation 3?
Well, I touched on that earlier; it's probably our biggest challenge this year – how do we keep an appropriate level of focus on all three key machines we sell? We still sell PSP in the UK, so it's four. But the key focus will be on those three – PS3, PS4, PS Vita.

It's going to have a tremendous year, and I think it's going to have a tremendous multi-year life way beyond this year with the UK consumers maybe graduating that bit faster onto PS4, but there's much of the world where they'll be very happy with PS3 for years to come and they'll have a slower adoption curve on PS4. So it's great we have these multiple devices and PS2 is just coming to a close now in certain parts of the world, so they'll co-exist, is the answer, at different ratios, depending on which market you're talking about.





Publisher: Sony Entertainment Developer: Guerrilla Games Origin: Netherlands

KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL

Sony's first look at the power of next-generation gaming

Next gen is here. With the glistening cityscapes packed with gigantic refracting glass-plastered skyscrapers and smoke, and the general level of scope in *Killzone: Shadow Fall*'s environments, Guerrilla's flagship FPS is out to prove that PS4 is kicking gaming into the future.

Killzone has for generations been Sony's go-to game to show off the power of new PlayStation tech – and *Shadow Fall* is no exception. Unlike *Killzone 2*'s now-infamous pre-rendered PS3 reveal trailer, *Shadow Fall* is running in real-time, and it looks incredible.

The immense scale hits immediately, making the player seem small, lost in a giant city packed with a bustling skyline of towering buildings with a mind-boggling draw distance. Every building looks real, with sunset bouncing off and around individual surfaces, each construct casting real-time shadows on those around them in different directions depending on your perspective.

Even in the metropolis, swathes of trees, vast vistas of pedestrianised walkways and crashing 100ft waterfalls populate every nook and cranny of *Killzone*'s next-gen city. But it's not just the macro-detail that impresses, but the plethora of textures, colours and shading rammed onto every surface, every soldier and every inch of game world.

Helghast armour ripples with individual threads, smoke carries thickly through the air in a dense cloud and even pavements pop with detail, detail, detail. *Killzone*'s reveal trailer introduces us to Vector City, a major human colony that brilliantly introduces a colour other than brown into Guerrilla Games' palette. It's a city not destroyed by war, but shining with futuristic purpose, set decades after the end of *Killzone 3*.

Then the world around you collapses. Fire burns, explosions blast out from a central point in a believable radius of destruction, and the air turns from soft amber to gritty grey. The trailer exhibited a whirlwind of content, showing enough to attribute itself to the *Killzone* legacy, but capatalising on the PlayStation 4's new power to set it apart from its predecessors, too.

The name Lucas Kellen is brought up on a monitor as the character wanders into the game's chaotic opening – this could well be our man. Another moment in the trailer shows the player swapping gun mods on the fly, switching from an automatic rifle to a sniper just by tapping a button and adding a scope to the barrel. It suggests *Shadow Fall* could see a weapon modification system, removing the need to manage loadouts; all wild speculation, of course, but it's natural to



INDUSTRY REACTION
"Killzone: Shadow Fall looked mind-blowing! Congratulations Hermen, Steven, Michiel and all of Guerrilla Games! #PS4"
Evan Wells, Naughty Dog co-president

■ *Killzone: Shadow Fall* represents a bold new chapter for the tired franchise. Set years after *Killzone 3*, expect a whole new host of characters and surprising twists on familiar enemies.



expect some tweaks to the gameplay formula all the same.

Setpieces are sure to delight. Hanging from a helicopter, our hero shoots one-handed while gripping a rippling rope. The camera pans through the stunning cityscape, lurching sideways when the chopper drops under a glass-covered bridge and panning back again in the space of a few seconds with absolutely no slowdown, despite the size of the world around.

Much has been made of PS4's new features – its touchpad-toting DualShock 4, its social focus and its instant play functionality. While *Killzone* shows no hint of how it might make use of the console's new innovative features, it is likely to be the first game that creates a unified social network around it. Like most first-person shooters, the only thing more satisfying than a good kill is gloating about it to all of your friends.

Killzone has never quite positioned itself at the forefront of FPS gamers' tastes, never quite toppling *Halo* or *Call Of Duty* from the shooting throne. To be frank, the franchise has struggled to make an impact in an intensely crowded genre. *Shadow Fall* could change all that, or it might just be a fantastic tech demo highlighting the vast, beautiful worlds the PlayStation 4 can create. Either way, Guerrilla Games' latest slice of Helghast action was undoubtedly the right choice to showcase Sony's new console, just as it was back at E3 2005 with *Killzone 2*. Suffice to say, this early footage already has us mesmerised by the possibilities of Sony's exciting new next-generation system.

■ Guerrilla Games has defied all expectation and introduced a varied colour palette into *Shadow Fall*; gone are the depressing shades of brown – replaced now with a gleaming scifi utopia.

PRECISION KILLS

△×○□ THERE ARE MANY ways to kill Helghast: small guns, big guns, throwing knives, hunting knives and all manner of deadly explosives. The ability to climb in *Killzone: Shadow Fall* may seem like a ridiculous feature to tout, but this gives you the opportunity to flank your opponent with a bit of verticality, all the better when you want to drop in with a sharp surprise. What makes this terror trip of wanton violence even better is the ability to slow time, giving you an opportunity to pop some skulls with precision accuracy. It's not yet known how you earn it, though we imagine it's through some degree of carnage.

■ On the surface, *Shadow Fall* sure does look impressive, but the draw distance is what has our jaws on the floor. A tantalising look at new areas to explore (and savage with gunfire).



Deep Down is easily the most impressive demo shown off at the presentation, a bold new look at what to expect from role-playing games moving forward.

INDUSTRY REACTION
"8 GB unified mem as baseline for next tech iterations makes me very, very happy. Fun times coming."
Tiago Sousa, Crytek

Publisher: Capcom **Developer:** In-house **Origin:** Japan

DEEP DOWN

Capcom showcases the strength of the next gen

On the surface, Capcom's new IP – powered by its brand new PlayStation 4 engine Panta Rhei – looks similar to what we've seen before: dungeons, dragons, epic *Dark Souls*-style gameplay.

But dig a little deeper and the full potential of *Deep Down*'s new engine comes into sharp focus. It's a desperate battle against a dragon that highlights just how mind-blowing a sense of scale and minutiae of detail the PlayStation 4 will be able to provide. *Deep Down* is perhaps the most arresting example of what to expect from the next generation.

Prowling through a dank underground cavern with a small group of warriors – we can gleam little tangible information from the demonstration, but it's impressive all the same. Is this Capcom's new look for *Dragon's Dogma*, or perhaps an entirely new co-op based adventure?

It looks impressive either way, and as an obscenely textured fire breather unleashes the most realistic flames from its spiny face that we've ever seen, we had to pick up our jaws from the floor. The environment is given the same incredibly textured treatment; darkness looks truly dark, but the contrast between the light that cascades through the ceiling with the murky corners of blackness is more measured.

Current-gen games have a tendency to present light and darks as set templates. Here, there are shades of grey (sans the sexual sadomasochism) we didn't know could be rendered, resulting in a room cast in various hues of dynamic light, making the whole room feel alive, organic and real.

It's in the faces, too, that this realism pervades; *Deep Down*'s characters have so much believability and expression, with eyes that shift as lips move to the perfect time of every syllable.

As a tech demo, it's simply incredible. But the game underneath packs plenty of promise too. Bringing a hunter/survival feel to its cave exploration, the beefy, armoured main character is seen firing a bow and switching between multiple weapons on the fly. And it's surely set to be a punishing experience for seasoned gamers; "Conquer your fear or die a coward" is the title's tagline. But the game is also set to tap into PlayStation 4's social features, mixing *Dark Souls*' message system with a Miiverse-style posting capability.

We're shown a post from the player sent moments into a cagey fight with aforementioned dragon: "SOS! SOS! I'm in over my head here… have any gear to help me fight this thing? Weapons, food, anything! Back me up and I'll share the spoils!"

Deep Down certainly looks intriguing, and as the dragon's fire melts the steel of a shield away before our eyes, it's a breakneck wake-up call to the power of the system. Capcom can't confirm when we get to see more of *Deep Down*, but this brand new and hugely exciting adventure can't come soon enough.

It's hard to shake the *Dark Souls* comparison, but *Deep Down* looks like its channelling some serious troubles for dragon hunters around the world.



IN THE DRIVING SEAT

△×○□ *DRIVECLUB* IS STRIVING for the most photo-realistic graphics in a videogame to date; with developer Evolution utilising the PlayStation 4's raw power to deliver on that promise. The way the game has been presented thus far makes it look like a strictly first-person racing experience, bringing players even deeper into the illusion of being on the track. It's certainly an exciting prospect, especially as Evolution is pairing up with some of the biggest car manufacturers in the world. Mercedes-Benz even debuted its new coupe in the trailer, giving driving fans a sneaky first look at the CLA 45 AMG.

■ *DriveClub* has been in the works for ten years, conceptually at least. Evolution has been waiting for the right technology to come along to let it realise its racing club vision.



Publisher: Sony Entertainment Developer: Evolution Origin: UK

INDUSTRY REACTION

"I think the biggest PS4 questions involved who was in the talking head reel but absent from the show/logo slide. Polyphony, especially.."

Dan Teasdale, Twisted Pixel

DRIVECLUB

A first-person racing experience unlike any other

■ Of all the games shown off at the PlayStation meeting, none show the potential to utilise the systems vast array of features as much as *DriveClub*.

■ Evolution has big plans for *DriveClub*, including the ability to create custom tracks and challenge your friends to race for criteria and skill levels.

Ten years in the planning. That's all you need to know about *DriveClub* to grasp the extent of Evolution Studios' ambition when it comes to their brand new racing sim. Coming off the back of *Motorstorm*, Evolution is searching for a way to scale back the madness found in their PlayStation 3 racer and return to a purer form of racing.

Essentially, *DriveClub* is built around the social aspect of car clubs. It's a concept that's fashioned into the very fabric of this sprawling next-gen racer.

Unlike *Gran Turismo*, this isn't simply another purebred track racer; it's a team-based experience pitting groups of drivers against one another across the globe, bringing the squad-based 'clan' idea that drives FPS competition and putting it in million-dollar supercars.

It means you'll be able to team up with a group of friends both in real-time and asynchronously to forge a reputation for your club in the steely fires of online competition – competition that spreads far beyond the living room. In fact, *DriveClub* takes PS4's 'play everywhere' social and cross-platform mantra and kicks it into top gear.

It's easily the title which best displays how the console's new Share features can enrich game experiences beyond the confines of the box under the television. A companion app will link to the game on smartphones, tablets and Vita, giving players "24/7 untethered access to their club".

Whether on the bus, train or halfway round the world, you'll be able to check in with your team, set up challenges, check records and organise tournaments for thousands of players, all on the go. It's an always-on world, leaving the car door unlocked even if your PS4-shaped key is somewhere else.

It's in this flare for innovation that *DriveClub* truly outlines how PlayStation 4 is going to redefine gameplay for the next generation, not just graphical prowess. But make no mistake, *DriveClub* is hands down the best-looking racer ever created.

Car models are outrageously detailed, putting *Gran Turismo* and Microsoft's *Forza* to shame. Climbing into the cockpit of a Hennessey Venom, the game's reveal trailer shows off the almost ridiculous level of fidelity in every millimetre of the car, inside and out.

Carbon fibre weave has been modelled to within an almost undetectable width. Flakes of paint have been individually added to car bodies down to a "microscopic" level. Evolution developer Matt Southern waxed lyrical about the effort poured into the title's visuals: "We've gone borderline insane with real-world details and subtleties," before adding, "we've emulated the effect of each individual weave in the thread of carbon fibre, so the pattern alters realistically with the lighting angle.

"Even the suede and carpet have a fibre direction map, causing them to reflect light differently when they've been brushed or touched." In motion, this obsessive explanation is almost academical. Simply put, it looks incredible; mixing the crisp detail of *Gran Turismo* with a warmth the established first-party Sony racer lacks.

What's perhaps more impressive is how the menu system layers itself right into the game. Without pausing, drivers can access menus and slide across club-related options, view XP, rank and other racers' info in an instant without dropping gears. 'Pause' is set to become a dirty word.

DriveClub takes the Autolog ideal birthed by Criterion and turns it into a slicker, load-free experience. Autolog is fast, but these menus look instant – a word PlayStation 4 looks set to align itself to with its instant-on games, instant-play downloads and instant social elements.

For all-round innovation and graphical clout in features, social focus and genre innovation, *DriveClub* may be the title that best showcases not just what PlayStation 4 can do, but what it is at its core. A powerful, innovative and stunning racer that looks set to redefine the racing genre for a new generation of gamers.



Sucker Punch is taking *InFamous* in a brave new direction. Considering the fan protection over one-note protagonist Cole MacGrath, we are happy to see them taking a chance on a reimagining.

Publisher: Sony Entertainment **Developer:** Sucker Punch Productions **Origin:** USA

INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

The series returns with a reimagined world

***InFamous* is dead.** Long live *InFamous: Second Son*, an aptly-named new dawn for Sucker Punch's franchise – melding an Orwellian *Nineteen-Eighty Four* vibe with the slick superhero antics that have come to define the series.

Second Son's strength lies in the world the studio has created for its latest title. Out is Cole McGrath, in is Delsin Rowe, a superhuman ruthlessly hunted by 'the man' in a dark, government-controlled version of Seattle, forced to use the powers that mark him out as a wanted man to escape capture at any cost.

Each of the first-party titles Sony displayed at the PlayStation Meeting demonstrates a new facet of the consoles core design. While *Killzone: Shadow Fall* acts as the graphical showcase and *DriveClub* the social butterfly, *Second Son* is hoping to redefine narrative driven experience for the next generation.

Control is clearly a central theme. "You are not in control," Delsin spits into a camera at the end of the games brief reveal trailer, aiming his barbs at the governmental overlords watching his every move through hidden cameras. That's not to say combat won't still be integral to the *InFamous* experience. While no clear gameplay footage was shown, we get a healthy look at what to expect in the trailer as Delsin rips through a selection of the cities finest.

It's this balance between fun combat and narrative focus that will make *Second Son* such an appealing franchise reimagining; the game takes a fairly well-trodden narrative theme, but looks to frame the action in a layer of delicious depth that makes the world seem endlessly believable. From guards gazing at multi-screen monitors – searching for their prey, ie the game's main character – to angles that zoom down dingy alleyways as if seen from behind a CCTV lens, the game draws heavily on those themes of governmental oppression, known here as the 'DUP'.

Indeed, although the game is hardly breaking any thematic boundaries, *Second Son*'s game world is saturated with a look and feel that shares more in common with anti-establishment novels than typical nonsense game plots, pulling in elements of Banksy in its art direction and *Minority Report* in its action. Sucker Punch split fan favour right down the middle when it came to the uninspired protagonist from previous iterations of the franchise, but Delsin's world looks so packed with richness that you'd be forgiven for thinking the studio was saving up its creativity for the series' rebirth.

The *InFamous* series is best known for incredibly fun, superpowered play, and *Second Son* looks to retain that feel. Utilising a deadly concoction of fiery smoke and mirror tactics, we see Deslin quickly dart across the gritty streets, slicing and slashing his way through enemies. He burns with a fiery coating, his entire body bristling with flaming embers; it serves well to highlight the PlayStation 4's graphical fidelity. While no hints were given as to how *Second Son* will utilise the PlayStation 4's unique capabilities, as a Sony first-party exclusive we should expect everything from full social integration to interesting uses for the touchpad.

InFamous might be an unlikely candidate to usher in Sony's vision of the next generation, but it looks like Sucker Punch is ready to stand and deliver. Hopefully, *Second Son* will push the boundaries on what we've come to accept from open-world city brawlers.



InFamous seems to be hitting many of the same beats as Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs*, the theme of political incursion and surveillance is going to be big in 2014.

BRIDGING THE GAP

△×○□ *INFAMOUS: SECOND SON* is set seven years after *InFamous 2* – ditching the fictional Empire City for the grungy landscapes of Seattle. Cole MacGrath and his love of electric highs has been dropped in favour of Delsin Rowe who seems to harness the power of smoke. It looks like Sucker Punch is treating *Second Son* as a series reimagining more so than a direct sequel, so expect a whole host of new main and supporting characters. Deslin's smoke powers certainly have us intrigued, while on the surface they don't sound as destructive, the trailer certainly shows him creating some carnage.

InFamous looks fantastic, and while the trailer looks like a simple pre-render, Sucker Punch claims it is in-game footage simply displayed at a cinematic angle.



The cute little guy sucks up bits and pieces (or absorbs relics, if you like) until he's nigh-on unstoppable. It's an undeniably excellent premise for showcasing a range of graphical ability.

An odd choice to usher in the PS4, but still *Knack* is an adorable new platformer brings us another step closer to achieving Pixar level visuals on a console.

Publisher: Sony Entertainment **Developer:** Japan Studio **Origin:** Japan

KNACK

An oddly charming system seller

Remember when the PS2 was announced and we were promised *Toy Story*-quality graphics in games? Well, two generations later and this ridiculous posturing may have just become a reality with *Knack*, a family-friendly action-packed launch title that looks like it's come straight off Pixar studios' drawing board.

Knack is a platforming affair featuring the titular protagonist, a hero that makes full use of PlayStation 4's power by showcasing a character made out of thousands of tiny, glinting pieces. The ability to expand from microscopic to massive size to smash up enemies in a host of lush, stylised environments doesn't hurt the machine's showboating either.

Aside from the gorgeous animation and graphical edge, *Knack* shows off some delightful gameplay that, while slightly reminiscent of Xbox 360 launch title *Kameo*, looks inviting all the same.

In the reveal trailer, we were treated to Knack suddenly shedding thousands of the shining, golden pyramid and cuboid building blocks that make up his huge brawler's body to become a diminutive tyke once more. This suggests a body-morphing mechanic, which could shake up the traditional platformer gameplay, asking players to match Knack's size to the situation to make progress. In one section, we briefly see Knack shed every last block, before slipping past a set of security lasers like a ghost. Another sees Knack pumped up to an extreme size, bristling with attitude and brawling with a massive green-faced, axe-wielding baddie.

INDUSTRY REACTION

"Most people complaining about not seeing the box wud not have been happy w/anything. Yes,I wuddda loved2C some mind blowing new play ideas but very excited2C Mark Cerny directing another platformer. ANY platformer is welcomed these days."

David Jaffe, God Of War creator

Seeing Knack grow larger for bigger fights, with thousands of strands and pieces moving individually, you realise the power of the PlayStation 4. Knack is the system's first mascot, and without a Sackboy in sight it's proof of Sony's commitment to align itself to all type of gamers with its next-gen system.

One of Sony's greatest strengths has always been its ability to provide diversity with its videogames. *Knack* forms a vital part in the system's launch line-up; the company is proving once again that there is no need to align with one side of the fence over the other. *Knack* is a great example of how power can breed creativity in its gameplay. As a PS4 launch title, *Knack* should carve out a niche on store shelves as well as a place in youngsters' hearts alongside Sly Cooper, Sackboy, Jak and co – a new PS4 hero to carry on the spirit of PlayStation's past platforming antics.



The Witness looks fantastic, no doubt about it, but we can't help but see a healthy amount of Myst inspiration through Jonathan Blow's design.

Publisher: Sony **Developer:** Jonathan Blow **Origin:** US

THE WITNESS

A puzzler for the next generation

The idea is that an open-world puzzle game removes the problem of linearity most puzzlers struggle with. As Blow, speaking on the PlayStation blog, explains: "It means we can include real puzzles that challenge and surprise you. In a linear game, if you get stuck on a puzzle, you are usually just stuck unless you look up the answer; this is why many linear games shy away from puzzles with non-obvious solutions," he stated. "In *The Witness* we can make puzzles as difficult or as subtle as we want, because if you are stuck in an area, you can simply go somewhere else. Unlike most open worlds, which try to be as big as possible, *The Witness* takes place on a compact island."

Traversing this gorgeous world looks to be a treat in itself. Featuring a multitude of themed areas – including an orchard, desert, shipwreck, marsh and mountain – it's a self-contained island teeming with lush detail at every turn. From the fluffy clouds moving over the horizon to the dense clumps of leafy trees and thick autumnal foliage blowing in the wind, PS4's power has been tapped into to create a world both highly sylised and intensely gorgeous. "You can run across the whole island in one minute ten seconds, yet we have 25 hours of unique puzzle gameplay with no filler and no repetition," claims Blow. "We have designed it so that wherever you are, if you want to change paths and go somewhere else, there are three or four different places to go, all within 20 seconds' walk."

The puzzles themselves seem simplistic, yet we're promised plenty of challenge, with touch-squares that need to be manipulated in each environment to make progress. Jonathan Blow had originally intended *The Witness* to be an iOS and PC title, but upon seeing the power and opportunity the PlayStation 4 hardware presented he opted to shift development priorities. Expect to see the puzzles handled by utilising the DualShock 4's touchpad.

Considering it's coming from the mind that gave us *Braid*, and has been in the making for four years, it's almost certain to be another ingenious slice of puzzle action. *The Witness* is a dichotomy – a title that could exist if PS4 didn't, yet one that promises to utilise both the raw power and the creative innovation made possible only by Sony's PlayStation 4, resulting in a game and console unison that looks to be mutually beneficial and incredibly exciting to witness.

Jonathan Blow's new game looks to follow in the footsteps of *Braid* when it comes to innovation in the puzzle genre.

Blow assures us that the game will consist of more than simply walking between the next objective. Though he's keeping quiet for now.

Even if this turns out to be something other than *Final Fantasy XV*, we are immensely impressed by the Luminous engine.

Publisher: Square Enix **Developer:** In-house **Origin:** Japan

FINAL FANTASY XV

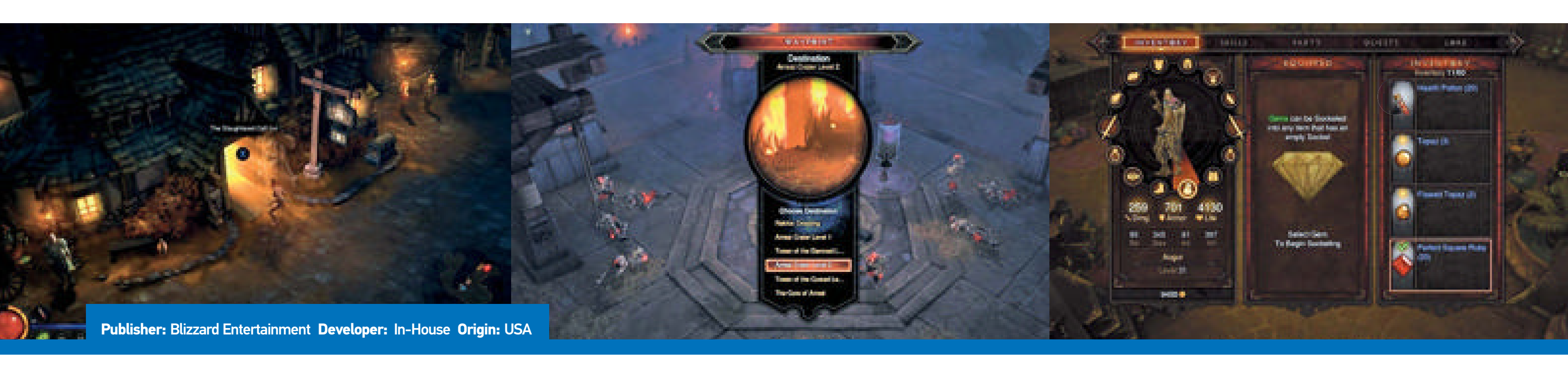
Square Enix's bold new RPG

We are making a pretty big assumption here folks, but we would honestly be quite shocked if *Agni's Philosophy* doesn't end up being revealed as *Final Fantasy XV* come E3 2013.

Square Enix descended upon the Sony conference to demonstrate its exciting new next-generation engine, with a replay of the tech demo it was touting on the convention circuit last year. Nothing has changed since the E3 2012 presentation then; the Luminous Engine is still awe-inspiring.

Agni's Philosophy showcases a near-futuristic world where ancient magic and advanced science coexist. The demo begins with a camera panning over what looks like South America, before diving into a church siege; it's among the chaos that Agni is put on a life-altering journey, by seizing a crystal that empowers her with – you got it – the ability to wield magic from the dying arms of a priest.

It's certainly impressive. With Square promising an E3 reveal for the highly anticipated *FFXV*, it's interesting to see the studio experimenting with a grittier world after the fantasy tropes of *Final Fantasy XIII*. Of course, with *Final Fantasy XIII: Versus* still nowhere to be found, it looks more and more likely that the *Crystallis* series will be coming to a close when *Lightning Returns* launches later this year. But if Square can live up to its promise of *Agni's Philosophy* representing a goal for both cinematic *and* in game graphics, then we are certainly in for a treat this generation.



Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment **Developer:** In-House **Origin:** USA

DIABLO III

Loot until that X button breaks

Diablo III is returning with the same hack-and-slash gameplay that gamers have come to associate the brand. Expect a few broken controllers in your household.

Appearing as an unlikely cross-gen title, *Diablo III* will be making its way to both PlayStation 3 and 4 as part of Blizzard Entertainment's new 'strategic partnership' with Sony. Making full use of the PlayStation 4's supercharged PC architecture, Blizzard has been able to bring *Diablo* to consoles effortlessly, with a version said to be already be well into development that "runs well and looks great".

A simple PC port wouldn't satisfy, that's why Blizzard has been eager to customise the game to fit around the new system; boasting a four-player, full-screen co-op mode for online and offline multiplayer. The user interface has been redesigned around the restraints of a controller as well, though we expect frantic clicking of the right mouse button to be replaced by the subtler sound of frantically tapping the gamepad.

Blizzard has been quick to confirm an "intuitive control scheme and a new dynamic camera perspective", though still no word on whether features such as the Real-Money Auction House will make the jump. Though we'd happily see it dropped if Blizzard relinquishes the need for an always-online connection that has plagued PC gamers since its release in 2012.

It's been 15 years since Blizzard released a game on a home console. That privilege goes to *Starcraft* on the N64, and while the studio has made many attempts to regain a foothold in the market (*Starcraft: Ghost*, anyone?), it's certainly exciting to see the kings of PC gaming come back to consoles. We are wide-eyed and eagerly awaiting its return.



Publisher: Ubisoft Developer: Ubisoft Montreal Origin: Canada

WATCH DOGS

The new definition of an innovative open world

N*atch Dogs* is Ubisoft's grand vision for the future of gaming. With the wild success of *Assassin's Creed* and the *Tom Clancy* franchises keeping the company's pockets lined, Ubisoft has an opportunity to explore a new IP that truly looks to push the boundaries of open world play.

First announced at E3 last year and now confirmed for PS4, *Watch Dogs* managed to steal the show from under the feet of Sony's first-party titles at the PlayStation Meeting. Even among the debut of *Killzone*'s second coming and the wondrous first glance at *DriveClub*, it's the high-tech antics of Aiden Pierce that has the industry ablaze with excitement.

Watch Dogs encourages you to get creative with the world around you. Aiden is able to hack into almost anything through a smartphone, opening new avenues of gameplay. Heavy-hitting combat, a smattering of free running and a primary game mechanic that encourages invasive behaviour – *Watch Dogs* is one of 2013's most anticipated titles.

CROSS-GENERATION

■ UBISOFT IS taking a big risk with *Watch Dogs*, promoting it across both the current and next-generation systems. While it already looked fantastic, the PlayStation 4 footage is quite stunning. Ubisoft is using the power of the PS4 to improve *Watch Dogs* where it counts: behind the scenes. Ubisoft Montreal is enhancing the AI, improving reaction and independence across the board. Nothing shatters an immersive experience more than an AI on a clear path; *Watch Dogs* is doing away with that entirely.

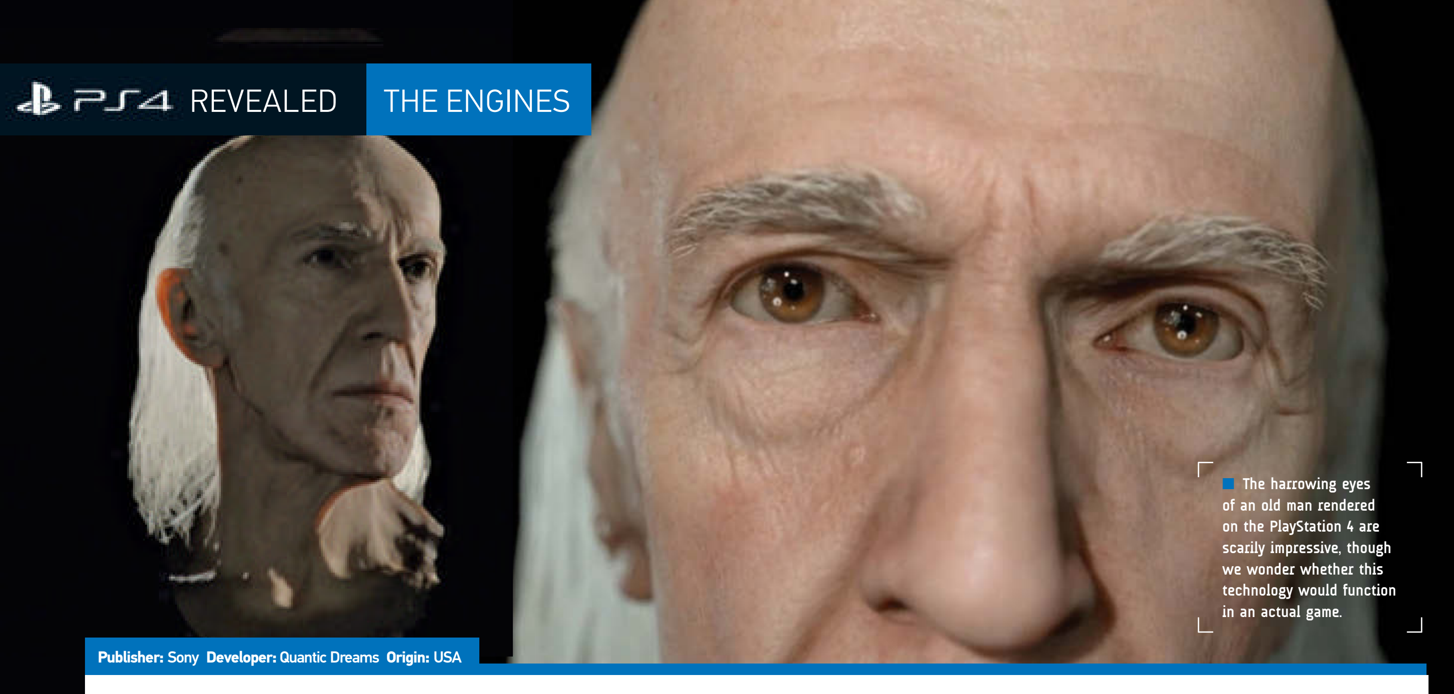


CONTROL THE CITY

■ AIDEN CAN hack into almost anything and – as the PS4 reveal trailer shows – the city can bend to his cybernetic will. We witnessed a high-speed chase reduced to a gunfight in the streets; as the cops begun to swarm Aiden he utilised the verticality of *Watch Dogs*. Eventually there's nowhere left to run, though those with a quick trigger finger can hack into a passing train, activate the brakes and leap onto its roof for a daring getaway. It's these sorts of daring encounters that sets *Watch Dogs* apart from every other open-world game in the market.

YOU ARE THE LAW

■ AN OPEN world can be a big place to explore, so hacking everything from security cameras to mobile phones is an easy way to track crime throughout the city. Taking on a judge, jury and executioner role, once you identify a victim and provocateur a meter will appear, highlighting your window of opportunity. Take a stand against a criminal and expect them to run, and that's where the real fun begins. Free running looks unbelievably fluid, and when you do eventually catch your man there's nothing quite like dishing out a swift baton to the face.



The harrowing eyes of an old man rendered on the PlayStation 4 are scarily impressive, though we wonder whether this technology would function in an actual game.

Publisher: Sony **Developer:** Quantic Dreams **Origin:** USA

QUANTIC DREAMS' PS4 ENGINE

The old man and the revolution

This is a revolution for storytelling in games." That's the message *Heavy Rain* developer Quantic Dreams beamed to three million viewers around the world at Sony's PlayStation conference with the moving head of a grey, old man.

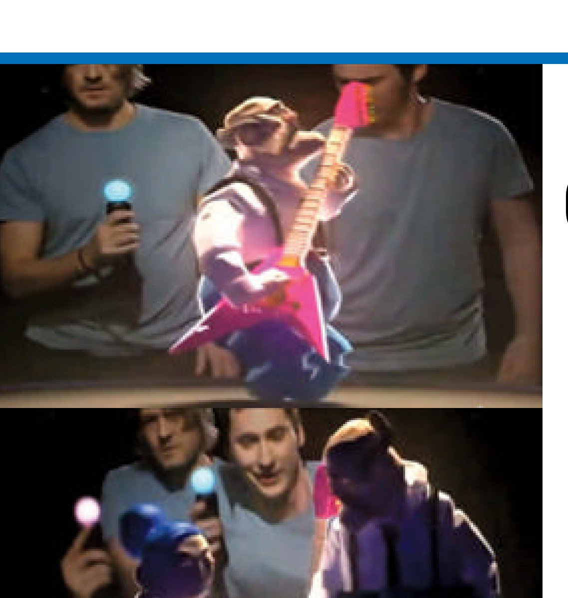
"Quantic's PS4 engine is so powerful it effectively removes any remaining limits for developers to showcase characters' emotions to the player," enthused David Cage.

The proof is clear. The old man's eyes moved with a slick, shiny realism, with skin taut across individually moving muscles – each movement of any part of the face triggering a chain reaction across the rest of it, like every bit is connected underneath by a thousand tiny strings. The impressive, albeit slightly creepy, old man is evidence of a new era of emotive possibility in realistic videogame characters, an *LA Noire* taken to its logical extreme.

Take the severed head with moving muscles out of context; imagined on every character in a story-driven game, like a next-gen *Beyond: Two Souls* or a *Heavy Rain 2*, and suddenly the bravado about games matching films for emotional strength becomes possible. That old man is a symbol of the dawn of a new era: power granting creativity, not using creativity to sidestep limitations. Remove the technological barriers and the only limit to enjoying the story, and connecting with characters, is the studio's skill and the script itself.

The machine is ready; it's up to developers to match its capabilities. When the technology's no longer an issue, creativity takes centre stage. As Cage put it: "We are not only limited by our imagination."

Developer: Media Molecule **Origin:** UK



MEDIA MOLECULE'S CREATIVE ENGINE

Unleashing PS4's creative potential

The creative console." That's what the *LittleBigPlanet* developer Media Molecule dubbed PS4, before proving once again why the team is regarded as the creative studio with a cavalcade of sculpting, song and dance.

First, Media Molecule head honcho Alex Evans demonstrated how Move can be used to whip up three-dimensional sculptures with exorbitant levels of depth – like clay sculpting in virtual space. He then teased that these models can be placed in levels and used to create entire game worlds. Is PS4 set to become home to *BigClayPlanet*? It's possible, and those possibilities seem incredibly exciting, offering a potential for both nuance on each model and vast scale utilizing PS4's power.

Still using the PlayStation Move controller, the studio then showed off a theatre production with the motion stick's every exact movement matched by the delightful puppet model dancing on stage before the players. Shifting theme again, the dance evolved into a rock concert, with every player controlling their puppets with PS Moves on drums, bass and guitar.

It's a wonderful portent for the future, showing how PS4's processors can be put to use tracking models in 3D space with the most minute of changes – every flick of a hand or tilt of the controller reflected in the puppet crafted from cyber clay moments before. Interesting, engaging potential.

TEN YEARS IN THE STARS

Bungie's goal for its 'shared-world shooter', Destiny, is no less than to reinvent the FPS… again. With aspirations this big, the developer really has no fate but what it makes for itself

In 2001, an unimposing developer in Washington changed gaming forever.

We couldn't have known it at the time, of course. No analyst could have gazed into a crystal ball and told you the impact that *Halo* would have – that it would excise the FPS from the PC and transplant it into the core of the console business; that it would influence every shooter released from then on forwards; that the series would be going strong 12 years later. No one could have told you that *Halo* – just another sci-fi shooter – would come to be regarded as one of the most important videogames ever made. *Halo* was a game first, a phenomenon afterwards.

Which is not at all the case with Bungie's next project. Having bequeathed the legacy it cultivated to 343 Industries, Bungie has now struck out across entirely new ground; yet this time its industry-altering goals are laid out in full, with aims no less than to once again change the way we view shooters through an experience pre-built to last a decade. Bungie has finally revealed *Destiny*, one of the most ambitious game concepts imaginable.

This is the grand project that the developer has been secretly toiling away on for four years, holed away in the hollowed out remains of a former bowling alley and movie theatre in Bellevue, Washington. What exactly is *Destiny*? According to Eric Hirshberg, CEO of Activision Publishing, it's "ambitious in scope, innovative and





creative in its approach, elevated in its tone, and is the kind of ass-kicking trek through the universe that only Bungie could create." High praise indeed, and it doesn't end there. "Very few games transcend their medium and their genre to truly become a part of popular culture. We believe that *Destiny* could become one of those rare games." Here, it seems, the phenomenon has arrived before the game.

To discuss the experience in more concrete terms, *Destiny* is another sprawling sci-fi adventure. However, this time it's reeled in to the confines of the planetary system slowly circling our sun; closer to home, then, but no less operatic in its narrative ambition. The story tells of a Golden Age of space exploration cut short when a cataclysmic attack almost wipes out the entire human species. Only one city remains safe, huddled under 'The Traveller', a mysterious protector in the form of a cracked, white orb, standing silent vigil over the remnants of humanity. Bungie truly hasn't lost any talent for its brand of Larry Niven and Arthur Clarke inspired sci-fi.

We join the human race at a time of recuperation, with players taking on the role of Guardians, powerful protectors enhanced by The Traveller that venture out to the far reaches of the solar system. Players must search amid the shattered remnants of an interplanetary empire for the secrets behind humanity's downfall.

However, the most important stories to Bungie aren't those it's crafting in-house. This narrative will belong to the players.

"As we saw *Destiny* coming together, we realised that it didn't belong to a genre that we could quite pin down," said Hirshberg at *Destiny*'s US reveal event. "It has elements of a first-person shooter, it has elements of an open-world sandbox and it has elements of a persistent world, and brings them all together in a new way that seems very fresh. We realised that to refer to *Destiny* as any one of these pre-existing genres is almost to under-promise or undersell the experience that we think it could bring to gamers. We realised that what we need is to coin a new phrase and a new way to reference what this game is. I think what Bungie is creating with *Destiny* is the world's first 'shared-world shooter'."

This 'shared world' takes the form of an always-connected console experience – yes, you will need to be online to play, and no, you won't need a subscription. Although no gameplay within this world has yet been shown to the press, Bungie scribe Joseph Staten did outline a scenario where his Warlock-class Guardian and his friend's Titan class met up in a hangar lined with multiple docked spaceships. From this social hub the two board a craft and head to Mars, where they battle a species of heavily armoured, rhino-like beasts named the Cabal. Outgunned, the duo are saved by the emergence of another player in their world – a Hunter class on a Ghost-like vehicle called a Pike – who decides to stick with them as they complete the mission and recover a rare artefact.

The game's multiplayer modes, both competitive and co-operative, have been designed in this way to be seamlessly merged with the single-player experience. Without any visible matchmaking, players can enter one another's world, their separate adventures overlapping and impacting upon each other's experience with no break in the game's flow. "Every time this happens – when you run into another player, a real person – it's amazing," effuses Staten. "It just doesn't happen in other shooters." Perhaps not, but it does in Sony-exclusive indie titles and hard-as-

It's difficult not to feel somewhat sorry for 343 Industries, lumbering forward with a twelve-year-old franchise while its creator takes on something new.



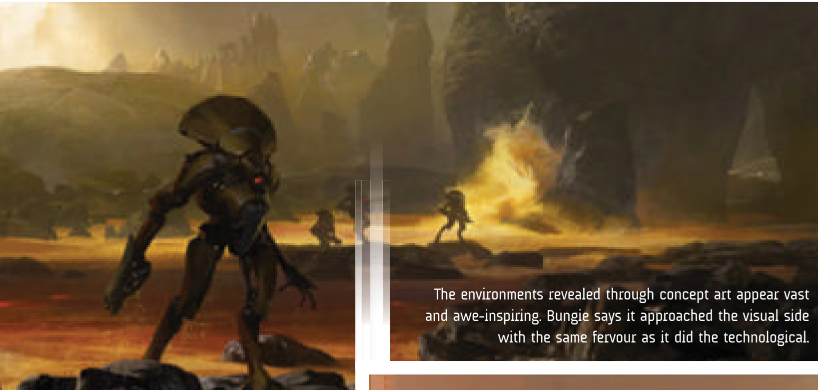
STARTING AFRESH

Upon embarking upon its ten-year quest, Bungie knew that it was going to have to discard its old tools and create new ones. The developer has spent the last six years rebuilding every part of its technology, creating a new multiplatform, state-of-the-art graphics engine that is tailor built to manage *Destiny*'s unique and complex worlds. The main innovation Bungie has been touting is its new lighting technology. Developed in partnership with NVIDIA Research, the lighting tech known as 'large-scale ambient occlusion' allows Bungie to pair real-time dynamic lighting with global illumination for some truly spectacular vistas. Its what powers the glorious sunrises and sunsets witnessed in the game footage released so far, and has been labelled "the foundation for all visuals" in the game.

The studio has also developed a new world-building tool titled Grognok. During the reveal event, a time-lapse video demonstrated Grognok in action with geometry, lighting and on-the-fly textures quickly pulled together to create a moon base. Described as "the nexus of art and design", the tool greatly reduces the time needed to create in-game environments, and enables artists to collaborate more closely with designers.



The future of next-gen consoles will be pivotal to the success of *Destiny*. Let's not forget the trick that *Halo* pulled however – software driving hardware sales rather than the opposite.



The environments revealed through concept art appear vast and awe-inspiring. Bungie says it approached the visual side with the same fervour as it did the technological.

nails dungeon crawlers. The impact of *Journey* and *Demon's Souls* on *Destiny* is impossible to overlook. In a manner similar to these games – but bursting with even greater potential – invisible matchmaking technology will inject players into the worlds of others, thanks to an intricate, highly complex online system. It's the core of the *Destiny* experience – emergent human stories that take on a life of their own.

Clearly, Bungie is building something that's meant to last and no wonder, given the game's projected ten-year lifespan.

The details of what's to come over the next decade surfaced during the Zampella/West court case of last year, with the contract between Bungie and publisher Activision being made public. Plans could have changed, but the general outline revealed that the first *Destiny* release is to come in the fall of 2013, with major releases at every two years afterwards and four downloadable expansions – codenamed Comet – coming in-between.

It's a big investment, for sure, but not necessarily one the games industry is entirely unfamiliar with. "The ten-year business plan is actually common in our industry. Sony utilises such a model for their consoles, and we've seen MMOs such as *Warcraft* on pace to break the ten-year mark," said EEDAR's Jesse Divinch. "Being ambitious and thinking long-term is always beneficial, as long as one goes into their ten-year plan understanding that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Their strategy will have to be optimised, rethought, relaunched and otherwise fine-tuned post-launch of a product."

It's certainly a gamble. The future of Bungie, and a significant part of Activision's future, rests on the success of this game, with Bungie having committed its entire staff of 350 and Activision pumping in hundreds of millions of dollars with little to no creative say-so. If things go wrong then the potential downfall is huge. "Activision's approach has always been to try to do a few things exceptionally well," said Hirshberg. "The dark side of that strategy is when you don't do something exceptionally well, it can be devastating."

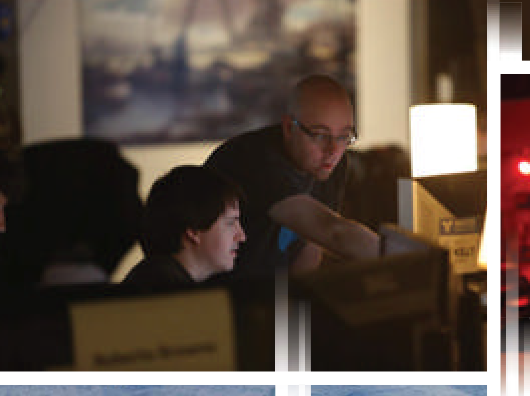
Minimising risk will be key for Activision over the next ten years. Having one of the most beloved and respected developers on board certainly helps when it comes to that, considering the predominantly excitable reaction that's greeted *Destiny* thus far. However, decade-long franchises aren't built on love alone. New ideas and new innovations are the only way to count



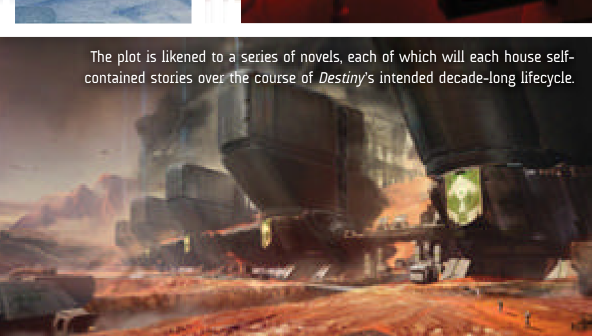
on continued interest. As one Bungie staffer put it, "We needed something that challenges and inspires all of us. Something that … has enough ideas in it that will last us for the next ten years."

One such idea is mobile integration. While *Destiny* is definitely a console shooter, Jason Jones, Bungie co-founder and *Destiny* project director, has stated that, "From the ground up we've built this game to be social and co-operative. We've learned a bunch of lessons from MMOs and Facebook games." Bungie will be looking to keep players interested in its title through the addictive gameplay model introduced by the world of social and mobile play, ensuring that interactions between players don't have to stop when they put down the pad.

Few companies have yet to deeply ingrain their game experience in the world of smartphone technology, although plenty are talking about it, such as Robert Bowling with the forthcoming Human Element. So far, however, the most successful experiments have been titles such as *Mass Effect: Infiltrator*, which allowed player's mobile actions to directly affect their Galactic Readiness rating within *Mass Effect 3*.



The apps surrounding *Destiny* promise far more extensive mobile connectivity, with Bungie revealing scenes of a proposed app through which players can do things like check their stats, receive notifications and read about their friend's adventures – even going so far as to affect the events in other player's games. *Destiny*'s social hooks will also carry over to Bungie.net, with accounts linkable to PlayStation, Microsoft, Facebook and Google profiles, further extending the reach beyond the console game. "We're not going to play it safe," said Bungie COO Pete Parsons. "We have a bunch of great ideas. *Destiny* will meet you wherever you are, whatever your mood, and not just with stats, but with meaningful activities that allow you to have a great window into the world that maybe you can only have on a mobile device. We're going to create experiences that are only on mobile, that go far beyond what you've seen on Bungie.net."



The plot is likened to a series of novels, each of which will each house self-contained stories over the course of *Destiny*'s intended decade-long lifecycle.

Destiny's music was recorded with a 106-piece orchestra and choir at the iconic Abbey Road Studios.

Utilising the ever-growing mobile and social market is one way of ensuring the planned longevity of this new brand, but so too is ensuring any upcoming generation gaps are efficiently straddled – meaning that mysterious 'future tech' that was mentioned along with *Destiny*'s announcement. A mystery that lasted all of three days, at least. At its New York event, Sony announced the PlayStation 4 along with the fact that *Destiny* would appear on both it and the PS3 – with exclusive content – on the day of the game's launch.

Exactly what will set the two console versions apart is difficult to say at this point, but it's clear that the PS3 version will lack the ease of social interaction boasted by the PS4 network. It's also logical to assume that *Destiny* will be optimised for the PS3 version, meaning graphics will likely be less than top-of-the-line on the PS4, but pushing the limitations of its predecessor.



16 THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT DESTINY

Bungie has so far only revealed the high-level concept of its game, but there are still details to be found for those who go looking

■ There's little to no UI, with the concept of a matchmaking lobby disappearing into the background. Bungie has created what it calls "seamless, invisible technology" that is continuously matchmaking but completely hidden to the user.

■ Players will be able to grow and customise their characters with new armour, clothing, weapons and items that they acquire and equip. This personalised gear will persist throughout single-player, cooperative and competitive modes, and has a very similar art style to that of *Halo*.

■ Martin O'Donnell and Michael Salvatori have paired once again for the music, but there's a surprise third composer this time: ex-Beatle Sir Paul McCartney. The writing process has been completely collaborative, rather than McCartney writing specific melodies for the soundtrack.

■ Competitive multiplayer has been confirmed. You elect into it, though, so don't expect to be suddenly shot in the head while halfway through a campaign mission.

■ Bungie has confirmed three player classes – Hunter (stealth), Warlock (magic) and Titan (big guns) – but wouldn't confirm how many class types *Destiny* will eventually ship with. Expect more announcements in the future.

■ Bungie has described *Destiny*'s universe as "mythic science fiction". Several locations have been revealed, such as the Cosmodome Breach, the swamps of Old Chicago, acid lakes on Venus, derelict ships abandoned in the rings of Saturn and more.

■ Two vehicles have been revealed. There's the Pike, which doesn't look too dissimilar from *Halo*'s Ghost, and the hulking quadrupedal Spider Tank.

■ PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 players will not be able to play together on the same servers. As for PS3 and PS4 users, Bungie sidestepped any questions regarding cross-platform play.

■ Bungie hopes to appease everybody with *Destiny*, from the FPS newbie through to hardcore shooter fanatics. "All core activities can be enjoyed by a novice player," said Jason Jones. What Bungie's finding hard is, "keeping it interesting for advanced players."

■ The concept art suggests that Bungie are opting for large, open environments. This will obviously play into Bungie's characteristic free-form approach to gameplay, but the focus is aesthetic too. *Destiny*'s world is built to be filled with eye-opening panoramas.

■ There will be many social areas, such as the city that sits under the protective gaze of The Traveller. Here you'll be able to mingle with other players and engage in activities such as gambling for gear.

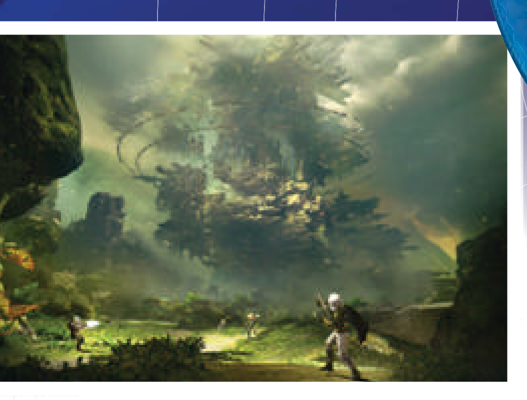
■ There's a ton of loot to be gained from raids and missions. For instance, in the mission described by writer Joseph Staten two weapons were introduced: a gun dubbed The Fate Of All Fools and a 45-caliber hand cannon called Thorn.

■ Space combat remains tantalisingly unconfirmed, but you will be able to travel through the solar system on various ships. When discussing possible game scenarios, writer Joseph Staten did mention that he could see his online partner had been "scoring big in competitive multiplayer because he's bought himself a new ship."

■ A menu screen revealed several options: a campaign option titled 'Chapter 3'; an option titled 'Bounty (collect your weekly bonus)'; a model titled 'Strike Raid' and one titled 'Faction Wars'. There were also friends listed in a squad at the top right, each with personalised icons and different XP levels.

■ The entirety of *Destiny*'s design is based around seven core pillars: a world players want to be in; a bunch of fun things to do; rewards players care about; a new experience every night; shared with other people; enjoyable at all skill levels, and enjoyed by the tired, impatient and distracted.

■ Four enemy factions have been revealed. There are the four-armed insect creatures named the Fallen, time-travelling robots known as the Vex, the rhino-like Cabal, and a kind of 'space zombie' that cruises the galaxy in mile-long tomb ships.



QUESTIONING DESTINY

games™ talks with Destiny design director Joseph Staten about the exciting developments from Bungie as they make their long-awaited return to the FPS genre. Now confirmed for PlayStation 4, Staten gives us a small hint of what to expect from the next generation of gaming

Nevertheless, at the back-end of a generation far past its expiry date, straddling *Destiny* across two generations will be what maintains *Destiny*'s sustainability over the next ten years. Much as it did with *Halo* – which debuted with the original Xbox – Bungie is right there at the start of the next generation with *Destiny*. That sense of timing promises an initial sales boost, but the long-term value of that kind of association cannot be understated. From here on out, *Destiny* will be remembered as the first big next-gen IP, anchored in the minds of the gaming community to a new wave of technology and gameplay innovations. It's exactly what happened with *Halo*, and Bungie and Activision will run with that correlation as far as they can.

There are potential challenges down the line; Bungie and Activision cannot control the future of the console market for one. Initial reaction to the PS4 might have been positive, but we're yet to learn the price point, and there's still plenty of time for Sony to cock up its head start. The Durango, meanwhile, remains an unknown quantity. For all Bungie knows, come the holiday season these consoles could struggle to sell and, if that happens, the current lack of a *Destiny* PC version could come round to bite the developer on the arse.

All that Bungie and Activision can do for now is control what they can, which in this case is the flow of information. Perception of *Destiny* is being carefully handled, with only a high-level conceptual look at the fiction being offered. As such, despite the reveal, *Destiny* remains little more than an idea, lacking the definitive shape offered via gameplay videos or concrete design mechanics.

All this arrogance concerning ten-year business models and transcendence of the medium may seem a little premature. But this is round two. Bungie has earned its self-confidence, and whether we can predict what's in store for *Destiny* or not, Bungie's legacy with Halo proves the developer knows what it's doing. After all, few developers can get up on stage, as Jason Jones did, and reveal a game with such a stark declaration of intent without receiving a single flinch from the crowd: "If you enjoy first-person shooters and you play them on console," he said, his expression resolute, "*Destiny*'s going to be the best one you've ever played."

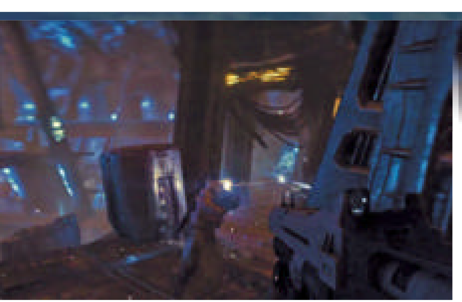
With *Destiny* finally revealed to the world, how does it feel to be embarking on such an ambitious and high-concept project? What's the atmosphere like at the Bungie Studios right now?
Everyone is relieved to get it out there and get people talking about it. Certainly, we are a little bit anxious, too – it's a big game with a lot of new concepts for the genre for people to understand – but by and large we feel both extremely excited by what we are doing and terrified by what we are doing.

We can't think of another game that has attempted the scale of *Destiny* on a console; is a perpetual world something that terrifies you as a developer or is it exciting moving forward to the next generation?
It's both. Everything in this game is a combination of the two. We dream up something, we laugh gleefully, rub our hands and get to work. But then we also feel the sweat trickling down the back of our necks. Everything we're doing in this game is beyond the comfort zone of what we do, and it's a great place to be.

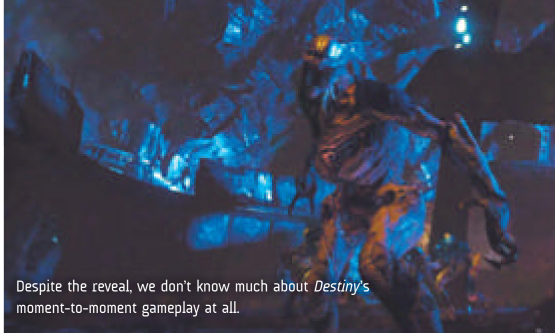
Do you believe that the FPS genre is in need of a shot in the arm? Is it your intention to once again re-energise the genre as you did with *Halo*?
First and most important goal was to press ourselves to do better. We've been doing this for a long time. Our first plan was to do something that's worth our time and to do something that's going to make Bungie stretch; that's going to make us nervous and go outside of comfort zone, and achieve something great if we can.

We operate by pushing ourselves – that's how Bungie's always worked. We make the games we like to play and we do it for each other. We spent a lot of time thinking about what we do well and what we can do better. We certainly thought of our own games and a lot of other games out there and asked ourselves the question: 'How can we advance the genre?' That's what we've been doing for the past couple of years."

Is it nerve-racking to embark on a ten-year project? What challenges do you foresee such a long narrative and development arc presenting?







Despite the reveal, we don't know much about *Destiny*'s moment-to-moment gameplay at all.



Activision has not announced a release date, but has said it's not factoring *Destiny* into its financial guidance for 2013. "We'll have announcements about release timing when we're ready," said the company.



Bungie is adamant that – unlike the *Halo* series and its Master Chief-focused narrative – *Destiny* will be all about the player and the stories they create.

If you stop and think about it, it'll drive you crazy. The pressure would be too much. At the same time, though, we have this responsibility to plan for the future – it's a great place to be at the end of the day. We certainly feel very lucky; not a lot of developers get this much certainty … that's not something we take for granted. We know where our paycheck will be coming from, which is a nice thing to have these days.

From a storyteller's point of view, I love the fact I know I can look one year out, two years out, ten years out and begin to plan a story with a very long arc. Build a world with real history, real stories and real mysteries, and know we don't have to exhaust them with one campaign. We can just take our time with things. That's something we've never really had the luxury of doing and so that particular aspect of the ten-year contract is really, really great.

How are you going to keep *Destiny* sustainable for ten years? Will the mobile and social integration play a big role in this?
The main thing is we are creating a world that has the ability to grow over time, and the most important thing that's going to persist over those years is the world itself and who you are in it. The first thing we wanted to do was make sure the world was big enough and deep enough that it could grab you right away when you went there the first time, and also that it has very clear avenues for expansion – ways we can go different places.

We want to make sure those fundamentals are there. A place you want to spend time in, a place that draws you deeper every time you visit. And if we allow you to be a person who is you – someone who represents your personality – and a character that is fun to play … we think those are the two big things.

It's our job to lay train tracks in front of you – to give you more places to go, give you more challenges to overcome. Give you new and interesting ways to change your character. At the end of the day, it's just a creative challenge of generating great content for people and right now we are thinking well beyond this first release. Plans that are going to bear fruit years from now.

Are you able to tell us anything about working across generations for this project?
Working on multiple platforms is certainly a whole different beast than what we're used to at Bungie. We took on a huge new group of staff to make it happen. Figuring it out to make it ship simultaneously on multiple consoles is a huge undertaking for us, definitely.

Why did you choose Sony to make your debut into the next generation?
Well they were the only company who could guarantee we could stand up in business casual – stand still with hands at our sides – so that was really important to the way we like to appear in public [laughs].

The reality is, these new consoles are coming and it was a love connection. That's the easiest way to describe it. We're excited about being as many places as we can with as many players as we can, and Sony really was excited about that too. It made a lot of sense.

The Share functionality that's integrated into the PlayStation 4 at its core reminds us of the social aspects first introduced with *Halo 2*. How big a part will Sony's new features play into *Destiny*?
It's a social game from the ground up. We aren't certain which of those features will be most important for *Destiny* on its first release, but certainly all those capabilities are really exciting to us.

Looking back on the *Halo* games with the theater and the screenshots, and being able to share those on the file share – that's always been a big part of the games Bungie makes. Certainly, what Sony's planning for PS4 is very exciting for a company like us.

Do you believe that being always connected and completely social will be a big part of gaming going forwards?
I think it is thriving. If you look across the whole games space, that's the nature of the beast. You need to make smart choices; look at social features and decide if they're appropriate for the game we are making. We never make those choices blindly.

In *Destiny* there will be places where the game is very social and there will be places if you want to play by yourself that's fine, too. Certainly, the story of *Destiny* is perfectly enjoyable on your own… you'll run into other people out in the world, but you'll have a choice if you want to party up with them and explore together. But if you want more social options, whether it be co-operative or competitive, *Destiny* is going to have a lot of options for you.

What do you hope players continue to get excited about over the coming months?
I want them to get excited about this new world that they're going to enter, full of adventure and full of mystery. Get excited about picking a person to be in this world and grow that character over time. I want them to get excited about the sandbox-action gameplay, and then I want them to get excited about imagining that action gameplay getting influenced by these new social features, most important of which are these public spaces.

"That's how Bungie's always worked. We make the games we like to play and we do it for each other"

Just a little anecdote: we're playing a game in the most recent playtest. Everybody's out in the world colliding into each other, meeting on Mars and Venus and having adventures – and all of a sudden the servers went down. Just because we're testing things, this stuff happens. And when the servers went down we couldn't run into other people; at that moment a collective groan went out at the studio. We have a huge open office, so if somebody drops something everybody claps. When the servers went down everybody – you could hear them – took their headsets off and went 'Ohhh…'

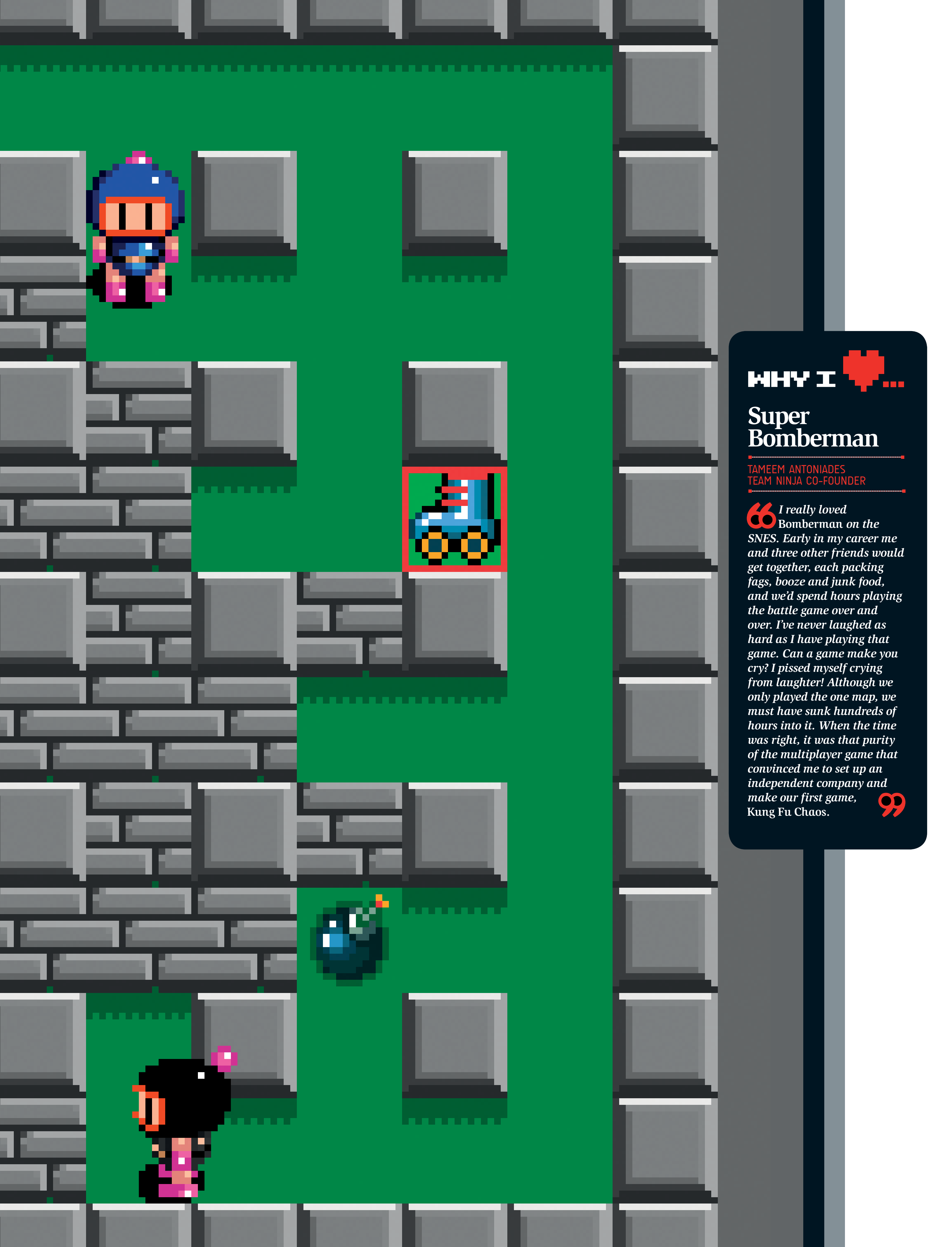
And that groan meant, 'Oh, this game just turned into every other shooter.' It stopped being magic, it stopped doing that thing that will set *Destiny* apart from every other shooter.

We really believe we have something transformative on our hands. That's hugely exciting for everybody here.



> "I've never laughed as hard as I have playing that game. Can a game make you cry? I pissed myself crying from laughter!"

TAMEEM ANTONIADES, TEAM NINJA CO-FOUNDER



WHY I ♥...

Super Bomberman

TAMEEM ANTONIADES
TEAM NINJA CO-FOUNDER

"I really loved Bomberman *on the SNES. Early in my career me and three other friends would get together, each packing fags, booze and junk food, and we'd spend hours playing the battle game over and over. I've never laughed as hard as I have playing that game. Can a game make you cry? I pissed myself crying from laughter! Although we only played the one map, we must have sunk hundreds of hours into it. When the time was right, it was that purity of the multiplayer game that convinced me to set up an independent company and make our first game,* Kung Fu Chaos*."*

(CLOSE ENCOUNTERS)

THE FUTURE OF XBOX: How Microsoft will change the industry

→ Thanks to Sony, the next stage of videogame evolution is here, and it's an exciting time for sure. We take a look at Microsoft's successor to the Xbox 360 and consider its potential impact on the industry. But for all the positives we've heard, there are still negatives to consider

WITH ITS GLITZY, game-centric reveal, Sony put the successor to the PS3 head and shoulders in front of the competition. Rather than focus on the stultifying technological developments and 'under the television' features, Sony chose to sell the PlayStation 4 as a gaming device first and foremost, and what a success that turned out to be.

Microsoft's next up to bat, with all eyes on the company as it prepares for its own console reveal, expected to be coming during the 2013 E3 games show. How it stands up to Sony's offering – and indeed reacts to it in the months between now and June – will be interesting. The PlayStation 4's social features and technological innovations will have to be carefully considered. If Microsoft comes out of the gate with nothing but fancy graphics and a new Kinect, it's going to be in trouble. New hardware's not enough; new business models are needed too.

Microsoft knows this, and it's unlikely we'll be let down. Expect truly exciting technological evolution, some stunning new and returning game franchises, and a harnessing of developments such as the cloud to change the way we play. But remember, not all that glitters is gold. For all the good the next Xbox console could do for us, there are plenty of negatives to consider as well...



THE WITCHER 3: THE WILD HUNT FROM CD PROJEKT RED HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED FOR PS4

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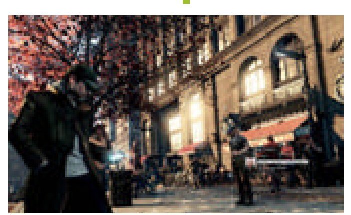
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THE GOOD

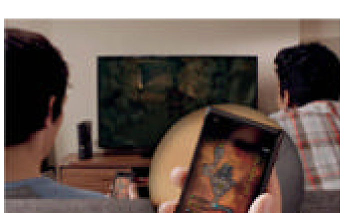
→ Rumours suggest Microsoft's next-gen console is set to offer a wealth of new IPs, experiences and exciting ways to play

New experiences

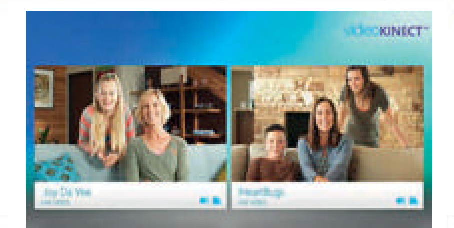


■ **IT'S THE MOST** obvious benefit of a new generation, but also the most potent: new videogames. The current generation of consoles are well past their expiration date, surpassing the usual five-year cycle by almost three years. Developers need new technology to play with and new boundaries to explore in order to innovate, and Durango looks set to be providing just that. The increase in memory, in particular – also rumoured to be 8GB of RAM – will enable developers to build bigger game worlds with convincing visuals, better AI, and stunningly complex FX. Better graphics and intricate game design isn't just good for the short term; in the long term it translates to more competition and, following that, more innovation.

On cloud nine



■ **THE CLOUD IS** going to have a huge impact on gaming over the coming years, something evidenced by the new PC-based consoles and the ways in which Sony is harnessing the technology through Gaikai. Make no mistake; Microsoft will not be left behind in this regard. "Increasingly, the games are going to sit on the cloud," Microsoft's Phil Harrison told a crowd at a recent event. "Instead of being device centric, they will be cloud centric. This vision is what influenced me to join Microsoft in the first place." With the Durango, expect your games to be more accessible than ever, with the inevitable Xbox equivalent of the 'PlayStation Cloud' playing an integral part in the physical to digital shift.



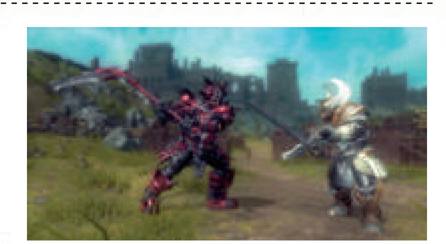
The online experience expanded

■ **ONLINE FUNCTIONALITY IS** now so deeply ingrained into both our games and our psyche that it's difficult to remember a time when multiplayer actually required another person in the room. Come the release of the Durango, it's only going to be further integrated into the console experience, with innovations driven by the likes of Twitch.tv, and the increasing popularity of e-sports and social media. As with PS4, expect to see every user possess a Facebook-like profile that's entrenched into the experience of every game played, and a 'share' button that allows users to quickly upload snapshots or movies to a bespoke YouTube-like database. Expect mobile integration too; SmartGlass was only Microsoft's first tentative step into a world where you take gaming with you wherever you go.

The hardware revolution

■ **FOR MANY,** the rumours that the Kinect motion-control sensor array will be included with every Durango sold – and that it must be plugged in and calibrated for the console to even function – will be a source of consternation rather than celebration. However, any derision directed towards Kinect comes from a place of disappointment; it is simply far too unresponsive and inaccurate to deliver on its potential. Early reports are suggesting that many more joints can now be tracked and depth resolution is greatly improved. The system's ability to independently track thumbs means that the frantic waving in intriguing but nevertheless disastrous titles like *Steel Battalion* could be a thing of the past. It's not just Kinect that we need to consider, either. The recently revealed Microsoft Research project, IllumiRoom, proves that the company isn't just concerned with motion control.





A shift in business

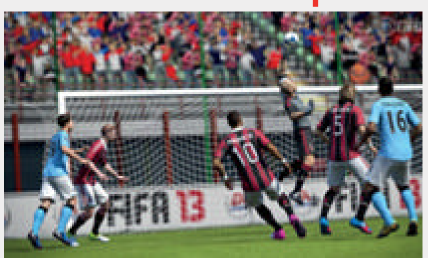
■ **IT'S EASY** to attribute the decline in console sales to them being on market far past their sell-by date, but there's another important factor to consider: the growth of mobile, social and online. Thanks to new revenue models like free-to-play, these developers are making insane amounts of cash in an increasingly lucrative market. Microsoft will respond, because if it doesn't its console division is going to find itself in dire straits. Sony is making subtle shifts into the arena by allowing players to try before they buy on the new PS4 network. If Xbox follows suit and further emphasises 'free', it could be the first steps towards unshackling the industry from the outdated business models of the past. This could attract more devs to consoles, create further avenues for risk-taking and, ultimately, have a bigger impact on the number and quality of the games we play than any increase in graphical ability ever could.

→ THE STRIPPED-BACK WII MINI IS SET TO LAUNCH IN THE UK THIS MARCH →

THE BAD

→ With Microsoft still leaning on Kinect and rumours of second-hand restrictions, we track how Microsft might stumble into the next gen

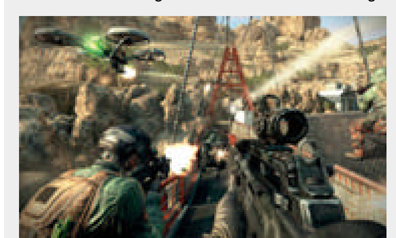
You shall not pass

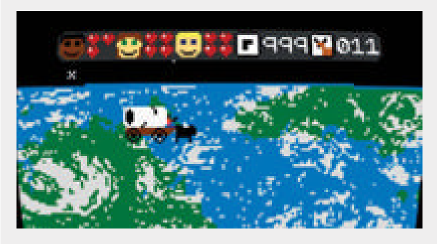


■ WHILE THE ARRIVAL of a third generation of Xbox will certainly perk up the industry, there are many potential downsides that must also be considered. First off, there are the reports that that all discs for the console will ship with activation codes with no use beyond the initial user, something that will effectively block second-hand games. We've already seen third-party publishers take a step into this world with the Online Pass, so the strategy isn't completely beyond them. If Microsoft does go this far, then not only will videogame traditions like swapping games vanish forever, but the lifeline for stores such as Game will effectively be pulled. Plus, it will only encourage more customers to look for ways to get their Xbox chipped. Hopefully the rumours are just that – and it's worth remembering Sony has debunked them for its console – because otherwise the future of videogames is heading into dark and murky water.

Increased complexity, increased cost

■ NEW TECHNOLOGY MEANS new experiences, but it also means an increase in complexity, with polygon counts and texture quality bursting through the roof. More complexity means higher costs; team sizes will grow bigger, development times will get longer, and marketing campaigns will bloat into Tetsuo-sized beasts. At a time when making a profit from a console game is a tough business, the prospect of doubling already considerable budgets isn't putting a smile on any publisher's face. This will translate into a diminished willingness to take risks, with big name publishers focusing even more on proven franchises. New concepts will continue to have a tough time finding funding, and the big bucks will only be divvied out to the titles promising a return on investment. Make no mistake, come 2020 you're going to be playing *Call Of Duty 17*.



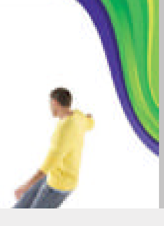


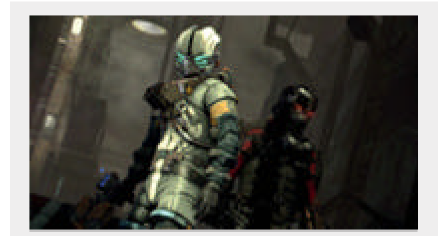
The walled garden

■ MAKING ITS CONSOLE less insular and allowing more freedom to developers when creating games would, theoretically, be of huge benefit to Microsoft. However, the chances of it actually happening are minimal. The increase in cost and reduced risk-taking will mean a tightening on quality control, with Microsoft continuing to curate exactly what appears on its system and how it is experienced. Don't expect initiatives similar to Kickstarter or Steam Greenlight to appear on the Durango – the publisher/developer hierarchy will remain, and Microsoft will continue to cast a watchful eye over how devs negotiate the system's red tape. With many developers now eschewing big consoles, instead looking to the possibilities offered by open-source endeavours like the Steam Box and Ouya, the future for creative endeavours on Microsoft's console are looking disconcertingly hampered.

The hardware revolution

■ IN SOMETHING OF an about-turn, we must admit that for all the potential positives an always-on Kinect could offer to gaming, it could be equally detrimental to the medium if handled poorly. Media Molecule's PS4 'sculpture' presentation showed this kind of technology has great potential, but Kinect, in its current form, is an undeniable gimmick in need of a serious improvement in technology – a hangover from the motion-control heyday of the last decade that's now largely ignored by the masses. Without a serious increase in responsiveness and accuracy – not to mention a wealth of quality software to support it – the Kinect 2 will suffer the same fate. However, the attention and R&D time required to achieve this could distract from more vital developments in areas such as game design and AI. Surely these are more important technological innovations than having your console recognise your face?



Micro-mismanagement

■ "THERE ARE ACTION and survival-horror fans, who are 19 and 20, and they've only played games on their phones, and microtransactions are to them a standard part of gaming. It's a different generation." Those are the words of *Dead Space 3*'s John Calhoun, an indication of where we're heading when it comes to in-game revenue models. Shoehorning microstransactions into hardcore titles is a worrying trend; we could be facing a future of paying for a game outright without knowing how much of it we're actually getting. The impact of mobile and social gaming on Sony's console has so far been positive, but there's much left to see and the future remains ambiguous. What we do know is that whatever Microsoft's reaction is, it will be motivated as much by money as it is by art, and for all the creatives it draws in there will also be plenty simply looking to exploit the system for an easy buck.



UBISOFT HAS CONFIRMED THAT BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2 IS STILL ALIVE, DESPITE LENGTHY SILENCE

AND THE EXCLUSIVES

→ We take a look at the Microsoft exclusives that will likely make an appearance on the Durango, and consider what we can expect from them

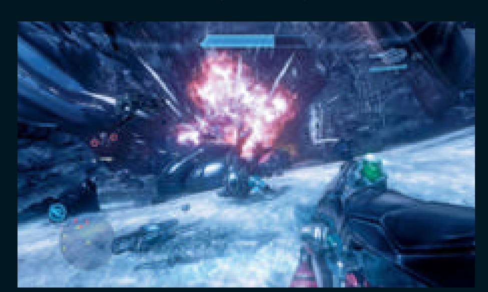


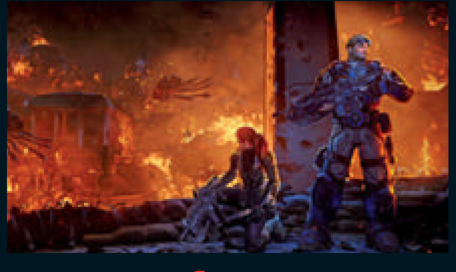
Forza Motorsport/ Horizon

MICROSOFT'S CORE racing franchise isn't going anywhere. Adored by fans the world over, the series will absolutely make its way to the next Xbox, and its photorealistic visuals will certainly benefit from the new technology packed inside the device. Expect some of the most gorgeous racing visuals ever committed to disc, and a whole host of new online options when it comes to competing with friends. More exciting than *Forza*, however, is the possibility of *Project Gotham Racing* making a big comeback. What better time than the start of a new generation?

Halo

NOT LONG after the release of *Halo 4*, 343 Industries' Frank O'Connor took to *Halo Waypoint* to issue something of a mea culpa: "We made a lot of mistakes. We can do better. And we know this, and we will." *Halo 4* wasn't a bad game by any stretch of the imagination, but as with anything there's room for improvement and the *Durango* offers great potential with regards to this. However, despite it making great business sense for Microsoft to launch its new console with *Halo 5* available on day one, there are plenty of reasons to suspect the series will stay on 360; 343 Industries has only just overhauled the game's engine, for one.



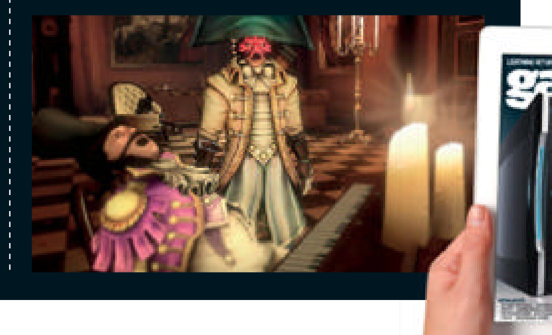


Gears Of War

WHAT CAN we expect from *Gears Of War*? Graphics, graphics, graphics. Wherever Epic and Microsoft decide to steer the series – whether it's more prequels, a spin-off, or a new threat for Fenix and crew to deal with – you can bet your bottom dollar that the real focus will be on just how pretty they can make it. Much like 2006's *Gears Of War* was an advertisement for the power of Unreal Engine 3, the first next-generation *Gears* will be a showcase for *UE4*, demonstrating the engine's sheer graphical grunt. Expect it to be as ubiquitous in the next generation as *UE3* has been in this one.

Fable

CONSIDERING THE technology packed into the Durango, there's a chance that a new *Fable* could actually deliver on some of the promises Molyneux was making way back in 2004: actual aging; huge forests on scale with Morrowind; reactive narrative elements like NPC characters coming for revenge if you killed their parents – even in *Fable 3* few of these features had come to fruition. Given enough time and money, however, a next-generation *Fable* could potentially do good on these nine year old promises, finally delivering a *Fable* we've always wanted to play but hasn't quite been delivered just yet.





LOST AMONG PS4 EXCITEMENT, WATCH DOGS WILL ALSO BE COMING TO WII U

(END OF DAYS)

Tracking the final hours of THQ

→ After two decades, the final moments came down to an asset auction as the THQ legacy was spread across the world. Here **games™** tracks the final hours of the publisher

By the time the dust had settled on 23 January, THQ was but a hollow shell of its former self. 23 years of activity in the industry came to an abrupt end as the courts forced the publisher to auction off its assets individually in the hope of appeasing creditors. Jobs have been lost, studios closed down and intellectual properties locked away – probably never to be seen again. But how have we arrived at the final hours of THQ?

Many elements can be blamed for the slow descent into bankruptcy: a global recession pushing children towards free-to-play online or tablet and mobile games, instead of THQ's licensed products that had proved so lucrative for the studio in the past; an unannounced MMO that drained cash before the publisher saw the fate of EA's *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* and reacted accordingly; the disappointment of titles such as *Homefront* and, of course, who can ignore the financial disaster that was *uDraw*. It all comes together to paint a picture of a struggling mid-tier publisher who was slow to react to the changing face of the games industry.



Inset In a desperate attempt to get some money into the company, THQ embarked on ridiculous 'Humble Bundles', giving their games away digitally for incredibly cheap prices. They even gave *Metro 2033* away for free over Steam to drive up interest in *Last Light*.

"The work that you all have done as part of the THQ family is imaginative, creative, artistic and highly valued by our loyal gamers," stated THQ's Chief Executive Officer Brian Farrell and President Jason Rubin in a leaked letter meant for internal staff.

"We are proud of what we have accomplished despite today's outcome. It has been our privilege to work alongside the entire THQ team. While the company will cease to exist, we are heartened that the majority of our studios and games will continue under new ownership."

Jason Rubin is frank about the state of the company he inherited in May 2012. The Naughty Dog co-founder's appointment was a last ditch effort to reverse the company's fortunes following the closure of *Homefront* developer Kaos and *MX Vs ATV* developer Blue Tongue, as well as THQ Digital Warrington, THQ Studio Australia, and THQ Digital Phoenix in 2011. Rubin vowed to turn the company away from the casual, mobile and licensed approach that led them so close to ruin, refocusing the publisher on triple-A development. The plan was just what THQ needed; with *Darksiders II*, *Metro: Last Light*, *South Park: Stick Of Truth*, *Saints Row: The Third* and a Crytek-led *Homefront 2* all pushing forward with development, it signalled an exciting new creative focus and direction.

Above It's strange to think THQ are no longer active, the publisher – once the third biggest in the world – was reduced to having their assets stripped away and its employees thrust back out into the world.

Above While the uDraw Tablet was an interesting concept, it was a critical and commercial disaster. Not only did it manage to siphon profits, but it led to the closure of studios around the world.

A GRAND IDEA, but the weight of THQ's ambition crushed the publisher. Disappointing sales of *Darksiders II* certainly didn't help matters, and in the end a vitalised publishing strategy simply wasn't enough. Rubin has since gone on record to claim a full restructure was needed for the publisher to continue operating. They hoped to achieve this by filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in the closing days of 2012, with an eye on selling the company cheap to Clearlake Capital and move forward with an all-new, slimmed-down line-up.

That restructure came, but not in the form Rubin had hoped. The courts decided that the quick sale to Clearlake for $60 million was not in the creditor's best interests, with more worth to be found in selling the company piece by piece. The restructure that THQ so

“We are heartened that the majority of our studios and games will continue under new ownership”
Jason Rubin, THQ president



LONGTIME ABSENT SEQUEL BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2 STILL EXISTS, UBISOFT RECENTLY CONFIRMED


Inset Despite the fantastic line up for 2013, THQ couldn't survive the court process. *Saints Row 4*, *Metro: Last Light* and *Company Of Heroes 2* were among just a few of the games planned for the 2013 window.

desired came as an asset sale rather than a full acquisition, and as a result, there had to be some casualties.

"We expect that most employees of the entities included in the sale will be offered employment by the new owners. However, we cannot say what these owners may intend, and there will likely be some positions that will not be needed under the new ownership," said the leaked letter to employees, adding: "If you are an employee of an entity that is not included in the sale, we regret that your position will end."

The auction brought in over $73 million, and while most of the studios and IPs found new homes, others weren't as lucky. THQ's publishing business wasn't picked up, leaving 300 out of work, with 40 PR and marketing staff in the UK also facing job losses as a result of the asset auction. *Darksiders* developer Vigil also failed to receive any bids; perhaps as a studio they were the furthest away from having a bankable product, due to the recent release of *Darksiders II* and new IP *Crawler* still early in design stages. The lack of bids has unfortunately left the entire creative team facing redundancy.

In THQ's final hours, the industry at large offered support. Sony Santa Monica put out an open call on Twitter for former THQ employees to apply, while Crytek opened a new Arizona based studio with the core Vigil team at its helm. Rubin has spent his time getting as many of the redundant staff into new positions as possible, though there's still no word on where and what he and the other THQ executives will be moving on to.

As the last ounce of *Saints Row* branded beer was poured out onto the old THQ office steps in memoriam, we are left with a picture of the mid-tier studio that tried. 2013 looked to be the studio's biggest and most important year with some great IPs, but in the end, two decades of wasted opportunities caught up to them.

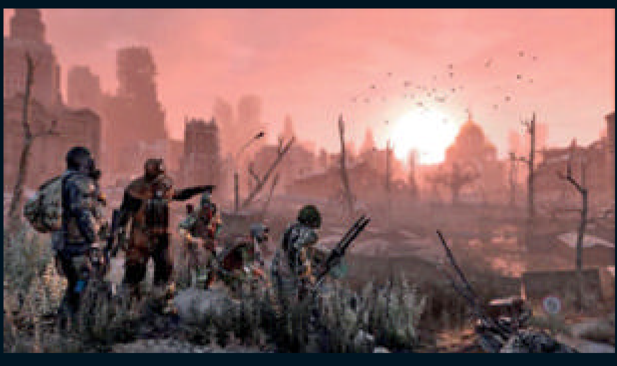
THE LEGACY OF THQ: WHO BOUGHT WHAT

As part of the asset auction, many of THQ's intellectual properties, studios and licenses made their way around the world to new homes. Here **games™** tracks the saviours, and looks at what the future holds for those carrying the THQ legacy on their shoulders



SEGA // JAPAN

SEGA PUT in a bid of $26.6 million for Canadian developer Relic Entertainment, securing the *Company of Heroes* license at the same time. This move will bolster Sega's already impressive strategy game portfolio, with Relic now working alongside *Total War* developer The Creative Assembly. *Company Of Heroes 2* is still on track for Spring 2013 release.



KOCH MEDIA // GERMANY

DEAD ISLAND developer Koch acquired perhaps its two biggest properties yet at the auction, getting the *Metro* IP for $5.8 million as well as acquiring *Saints Row* developer Volition for $23 million. Sadly, the *Red Faction* franchise was not included in the transaction.

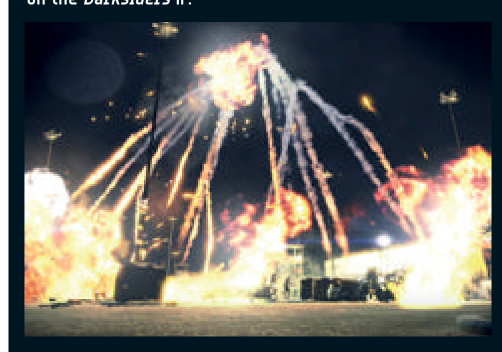


UBISOFT // FRANCE

WHILE THEY failed to win the bid for Volition, Ubisoft did acquire the rights to *South Park: Stick Of Truth* for $3.2 million, and bought THQ Montreal (housing over 500 employees) for $2.5 million. Thanks to the buy, *Assassin's Creed* creator Patrice Desilets also returns to Ubisoft.

CRYTEK // GERMANY

CRYTEK PURCHASED the rights to *Homefront* for $500,000 so their two-year development on the sequel wouldn't go to waste. Crytek also pushed forward with plans to expand into the USA, opening a studio with the core Vigil team at the helm – though they passed on the *Darksiders* IP.





TAKE TWO INTERACTIVE

TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS, the original developers of *Left 4 Dead*, were outbid for their own game during the auction, with Take 2 offering $11 million for the studio and a new IP – codenamed *Evolve*. It is also thought that Take 2 purchased the rights to *WWE* following their return to the wrestling federation.

ZYNGA CLOSES DOWN ITS BALTIMORE OFFICE, NEW YORK AND TEXAS CLOSURES ALSO POSSIBLE

Below The Toybox mode allows players to build their own worlds and fill them with a variety of Disney characters, showing an uncharacteristic disregard for canon.

(TOY STORY)

Disney vs Activision: To Infinity and beyond

→ How *Disney Infinity* is taking on Activision's *Skylanders*, and why NFC technology will continue to dominate the market

S*kylanders* defined the concept of NFC play that combined videogames and toys, and has managed to keep an undisputed stranglehold on the market it created for the last two years – but the announcement of *Disney Infinity*, the entertainment giant's very own competing title, might signal the end of their dominance.

It's a great market to be a part of: in Q1 2012, *Skylanders* toys outsold *Star Wars* action figures, and over 30 million models have been sold worldwide since release. *Skylanders Giants*, the sequel to the original, made over $195 million in US sales alone.

It has taken Disney three years of development to reach a stage where they're ready to show off their product to the world's press. *Disney Infinity* plays like a cross between *Lego Star Wars*, *Little Big Planet* and – crucially – every Disney film ever. Captain Jack Sparrow can hop on the *Muppets'* Electric Mayhem Bus and scream over to the *Tron* raceway, if you like. A commercially potent mixture.

It's a massively ambitious project. At the time of writing we were only shown the playsets – standalone games, in other words – for *Monsters Inc* and *The Incredibles*, but both show immediate differences in play style, shifting from stealth and exploration to brawling between sets. Each playset provides between six-seven hours of play, but the real strength lies in the mighty Toybox mode.

The mode – adapted from *Toy Story 3* – builds on the idea of level creation and allows players to access a huge 3D space with a wide variety of objects and characters to place and control. Aside from just looking pretty, it gives users the chance to build their own games through a series of logic tools that can build anything from a simple platformer to recreations of *Contra*, *Joust*, *Gauntlet*, *Angry Birds* or *Mario Kart*.

Above Activision is pushing *Skylanders: Swap Force*, enabling players to swap character components in 256 combinations.



Below The *Monsters Inc* playset in *Infinity* is set before the films and focuses on Mike and Sully's college days.

Players can invite up to three others to their Toybox to mess around and play together. Wider distribution of user-generated content will be focused through regular contests and filtered through moderators to ensure that nothing obscene or vulgar slips through to impressionable young players.

Conversely, *Skylanders* has led with *Swap Force*, a new set of toys with interchangeable top and bottom halves. While the top half defines combat abilities, the bottom determines locomotion, which gates off certain parts of the

> "We both have these interactive game pieces, but I think the similarity stops there"
> John Vignocchi, executive producer

→ BIOSHOCK INFINITE ON VITA HAS YET TO BEGIN DEVELOPMENT, ACCORDING TO IRRATIONAL'S KEN LEVINE



level; flying characters can negotiate airborne obstacle courses, climbing characters can scale walls and so on. If you want to take a sassy octopus pirate and stick a unicycle wheel in place of his tentacles, that is a thing you can (and should) do.

The new toys – 16 swappable ones, 16 single-part figures and 16 returning fan favourites with upgraded powers – are featured in a fresh game boasting around 12 hours of play, improved animations, art for all characters and – finally – a jump button.

BUT FOR ALL the talk of innovation and broadening play experience, *Skylanders* feels limited next to *Infinity*. With the new toys requiring a hardware upgrade to use – a new 'Portal Of Power' NFC reader – Activision are banking on the incredible brand loyalty they've built up over the last two years to keep ahead in the market. Unfortunately, taking on Disney in a brand loyalty fight might be a harder battle than they'd like.

We asked John Vignocchi, executive producer of *Infinity*, what they were planning on doing to take down *Skylanders* as the monopoly holder in this huge and emerging market.

"We'll do it the software and gameplay way. I think *Skylanders* is a great game. I think it's a super-cool experience. I think that the comparisons between *Skylanders* and *Infinity* are there because we both have these interactive game pieces, but I think the similarity stops there." John later admitted to owning every single *Skylanders* toy, which might just be healthy research on his competitor. There's a genuine sense of wonder in *Infinity*, sensation that there's more to come, and a feeling of agency on the part of the player – something the linear *Skylanders* lacks.

Guha Bala, President of Vicarious Visions (developers of *Skylanders: Swap Force*) didn't have a lot to say about *Infinity*: "How do we make *Swap Force* the next level of toys-to-life? How do we bring innovation on the toys side as well as on the games side? How do we increase the value of your collection? That's my entire mission in life right now. So honestly, I don't have much of a perspective on what other companies are doing."

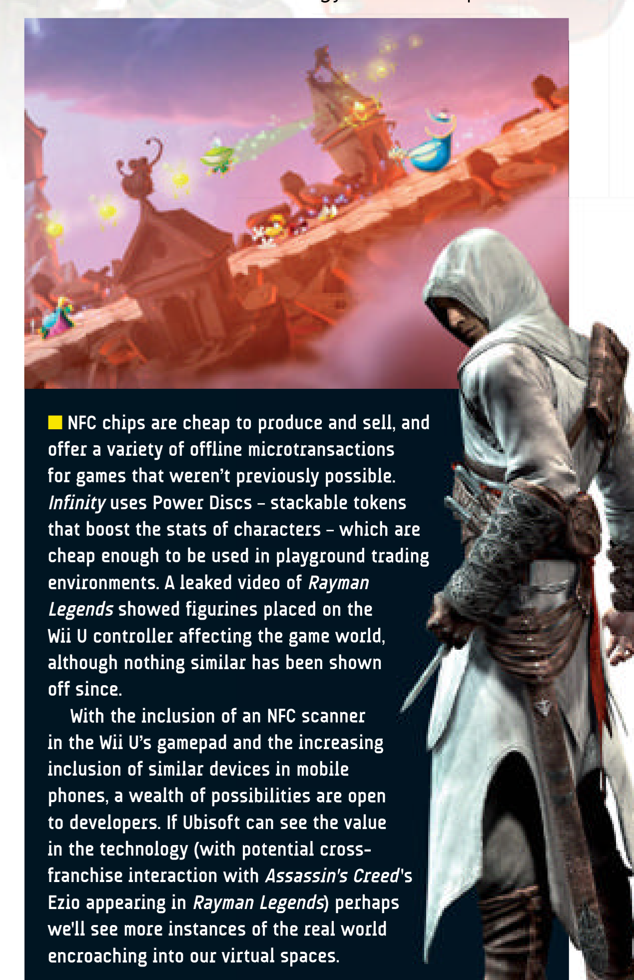
Bala declined to comment on Disney, yet it's hard to believe that Activision hasn't kept an eye on the developments of what will soon be its biggest rival. But it's understandable that its cards are held close as *Infinity* is, at time of writing, essentially an unknown quantity. The wide variety of gameplay options and reliance on UGC are a gamble that might not pay off, even with the weight of nostalgia and the world's biggest entertainment properties behind them. Peripheral-centric games tend to have their day before eventually fading away.

"The game is a playground for your toys. We would like to make your living room a playground." Disney, it seems, have the same aim in mind. Yet it remains to be seen if that room is big enough for both of them.

Above The high quality of Activision's toys continues to improve, as shown by the mysterious Stealthelf and the sassy Washbuckler.

NFC: THE NEXT BIG THING

→ Will near-field technology overtake triple-A?



NFC chips are cheap to produce and sell, and offer a variety of offline microtransactions for games that weren't previously possible. *Infinity* uses Power Discs – stackable tokens that boost the stats of characters – which are cheap enough to be used in playground trading environments. A leaked video of *Rayman Legends* showed figurines placed on the Wii U controller affecting the game world, although nothing similar has been shown off since.

With the inclusion of an NFC scanner in the Wii U's gamepad and the increasing inclusion of similar devices in mobile phones, a wealth of possibilities are open to developers. If Ubisoft can see the value in the technology (with potential cross-franchise interaction with *Assassin's Creed*'s Ezio appearing in *Rayman Legends*) perhaps we'll see more instances of the real world encroaching into our virtual spaces.



EX-EPIC DESIGNER CLIFF BLESZINSKI THINKS NINTENDO COULD GO SOFTWARE-ONLY IN FUTURE →

Right Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate canonically takes place just after the events of the first Lords Of Shadow game. The ending will set-up the narrative for Lords Of Shadow 2, due for release later in the year.

(TAKE A BITE)

Legacy Of Darkness: Reimagining Castlevania

→ Konami's Dave Cox discusses MercurySteam's 3DS Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow sequel, Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate, and how the studio reimagined the Belmonts for a new generation of gamers

What was the decision behind developing the direct continuation of the *Lords Of Shadow* story on 3DS?

Well, basically we finished the original *Lords Of Shadow*, but it hadn't been released and there was a period of uncertainty at MercurySteam about what was going to happen next. The studio head came up to me and said: 'If we do not have a project by the end of the month we're going to have to let people go and maybe close the studio.' So I said to him that we could probably get a handheld game off the ground pretty quickly. We had this idea about Gabriel and Marie having a child and it was something we were going to include in the epilogue of *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*, but we felt it was one twist too many. We left it on the drawing board and that was the first original idea we went back to. We pitched it to Japan and they liked it, so it got the green light and we started development. Then *Lords Of Shadow* was released and received a really positive reception – it was the biggest selling *Castlevania* of all time.

Above With Lords Of Shadow 2 starting development after Mirror Of Fate, MercurySteam found themselves redesigning most of the characters in Mirror Of Fate to coincide with their appearance in the next release.

Did that change your approach to the 3DS follow-up?

Well, it was at that point that Japan said they'd like us to do a sequel. However, we'd just started to do the handheld game. Essentially we had an idea for arc one and two, but we hadn't really thought about the middle. What can we put in there? We had this idea about Gabriel and Marie's son so that's a start. Maybe this can be about the Belmonts and their relationship with Dracula? During one of the design meetings one of the guys said: 'What if we made a sequel to *Dracula's Curse*? What if there hadn't been any other *Castlevania* games released, that came out in the Nineties, and 20 years later this was the follow-up?' We laughed about how ridiculous this was, but the idea of multiple characters was quite appealing. We started to think about what characters to bring: Simon was an iconic character, and we already thought about Trevor as he's the son of Gabriel and Marie; and then Alucard was another iconic character. Slowly and surely the idea started to come together and how the middle part could fit into the overarching story. It had to be about Dracula, but this could be a game that explains why it's the Belmonts that are going after Dracula in each era. In the original *Castlevania* games you were just a warrior that went to a castle and killed Dracula and that was the end. Let's tell it from a new perspective; let's explore why this blood feud exists and how it came about.

How's the relationship been with Konami?

We had a certain amount of freedom on the first game because we had Hideo Kojima's name attached to the project. He came on board to really take the pressure off. There was still a lot of scrutiny, a lot of uncertainty about the direction we were taking and a lot of people in the company were quite worried about it. But once the game came out and it was successful they let the guys go out and do what they wanted. It seems to be that people are willing to accept it, they know that it's going to be a different Simon Belmont, a different Alucard, and that it's not going to be Metroidvania-style; it's about combat and action. In some ways it has made it easier, not just in terms of development but also PR. We've broken down the barriers by releasing *Lords Of Shadow*; we took a big risk with that title. Now that's been accepted we feel vindicated,


ALL PS4 GAMES WILL BE AVAILABLE AS DAY ONE DIGITAL DOWNLOADS, SONY HAS CONFIRMED



"You'll see Dracula like you've never seen him before"
Dave Cox, Konami

and now we can really be free in terms of character, design, story and how we present them.

Are you embracing the comparisons to *Castlevania 3: Dracula's Curse*?
Yeah, I think so. We've always been about the classic games. I'm 46 years old. I grew up with the 8-bit games, I grew up with those classic games, and that for me is what *Castlevania* is all about. I joined Konami in 1997 and I was project manager for *Symphony Of The Night*, and at the time that was the spin-off game. The N64 title was meant to be the next big *Castlevania* title, but in the end the spin-off became more popular and that's been *Castlevania* since '97. For me it's more about reintroducing the classic elements of *Castlevania* but trying to keep it modern as well. You don't want to step back to '92 or '93, you want to do something new. But I think that a lot of the serious staples that I grew up with [are under-represented]; the whip for example – you haven't seen many *Castlevania* games with a whip since 1997. This game feels like a modern action-adventure game. It's more combat focused, but it has its foot in the past as well; it has a classic feel to it. I welcome any comparisons to *Castlevania 3: Dracula's Curse*.

You've said it's not Metroidvania, but there are certainly design elements that resemble that style.
I think because we've got a map in there. What we really wanted to do was have a game where it was story focused, that led the player in a direction where there was a certain amount of backtracking, but it wasn't all about going around the console and finding loads of items. That's not the type of game we want to make; we want to make a story-driven action-adventure game. We tell the story backwards in this game: you start with Simon, then you go through Alucard's story and finally Trevor's. It's told like *Memento* – it's not until the final cutscene that you really understand the story. It all clicks into place. Then you realise that some of the cut-scenes that you saw earlier are loaded with hidden meaning and depth. For us, it was all about capturing that classic feel but not trying to replicate it.

Above Dave Cox has worked at Konami since 1997, joining the company as project manager on *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*, and later working on the European launches for *Silent Hill* and *Metal Gear Solid*.

Given the surprising conclusion of *Lords Of Shadow*, was there a pressure to end *Mirror Of Fate* and *Lords Of Shadow 2* with a similarly shocking plot twist?
We didn't plan to do it. The ending is unexpected, but in a different way. As I see Dracula as a character the ending is unexpected from an emotional perspective. You'll see Dracula like you've never seen him before.

Have you planned where the series continues after *Mirror Of Fate* and *Lords Of Shadow 2*?
We as a team have decided that we have a story to tell and then we want to leave the legacy for someone else to take control of. That's not to say there wont be any more *Lords Of Shadow* titles or any more *Castlevania* games, but MercurySteam as a team don't want to be involved in that. They as a studio want to grow, and in order to do that they need to do new projects and different things. They don't want to be known as 'The *Castlevania* studio', and I totally get and understand that. Their ambition is over the next ten years to be at the level of Naughty Dog and those other big studios. Also, *Castlevania* is one of those series where it benefits from having new creatives, new visions and new minds – constantly reinventing itself. It can handle having someone else coming in and doing a new take on it.

Given the success of the *Castlevania* reboot, is there another retro Konami series you'd like to revisit?
Yeah, there's a couple. I'm a big fan of *Contra*, it's my second love after *Castlevania*. The thing about *Contra* is nothing has been mainstream since *Contra III* – the rest has been core-gamer stuff. I think it's crying out for a rebirth. Whether we get the opportunity or not, I don't know. *Contra* would be cool.





Left Getting the combat system established in *Lords Of Shadow* right in *Mirror Of Fate* was crucial for the development team, as Dave Cox explains: "We didn't want people to pick-up *Mirror Of Fate* and think, 'Shit, this is nothing to do with *Lords Of Shadow*.'"

TELLTALE HAS TEASED 'SOMETHING EXTRA' OF THE WALKING DEAD GAME BEFORE SEASON 2 ARRIVES

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King

Have we seen the last of demos?



Xbox Live Arcade wasn't always the beast it is today. Those who were early Xbox 360 adopters might remember the depressing days circa 2006, when Greg Canessa was group manager for the service and Microsoft imposed an arbitrary 50MB size limit on released games. Look at some of the games released on Live Arcade that year: *Frogger*, *Totemball*, *Crystal Quest*, *Time Pilot*, *New Rally-X*. Hardly up there with the likes of *Trials HD* or *The Walking Dead*.

The reason I mention this is that demos mattered in those dark days, because the novelty of the service and the relative scarcity of the games made each Xbox Live Arcade release something of an event. *Heavy Weapon* was one such release in January 2007. It was a brilliant multiplayer game where the action slowly scaled up until the screen was full of bombs, bullets and sonic booms, players knocked out of action cheering the sole survivor on their team until their respawn timer had counted down and they could rejoin the chaos. And yet almost everyone I spoke to about *Heavy Weapon* said the same thing: it was boring. Bland. Dull. It didn't even come close to tallying with my own experience of the game.

The problem was the demo. It never ran long enough for the action to escalate to those eye-popping levels of carnage, which was *Heavy Weapon*'s USP. If the demo was to be believed, *Heavy Weapon* was... well, it was boring, bland and dull. Presumably not PopCap's intention, but perhaps an unwanted (and inevitable) side effect of Microsoft enforcing an all-games-must-have-demos policy for Xbox Live.

That's not an isolated incident either. This generation has been littered with demo misfires, scoring gaping wounds in games that the marketing and PR teams never quite had the magic to stitch up in time for release. It's hard to believe *Sonic The Hedgehog* was once a hotly anticipated game before it hit the shelves in 2006, but at the very least its status as a next-gen *Sonic* title made it an interesting prospect.

This generation has been littered with demo misfires, scoring gaping wounds in games that the marketing and PR teams never quite had the magic to stitch up

An early demo killed any anticipation. Likewise, *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty* had an interesting alternate history concept, but the execution was woeful, as the demo showed. *Hour Of Victory* was perhaps the biggest fiasco of all. It achieved the double whammy of having both an awful demo and a PR misfire in the demo quickly being pulled from Xbox Live then re-uploaded, which drove more eyes towards Midway's shoddy World War II shooter for point-and-laugh purposes.

THE ARGUMENT THAT demos do more harm than good was made by Schell Games CEO and industry analyst Jesse Schell (of course) at DICE Summit 2013. According to statistics he's collated, Schell's argument is that without a demo, gamers are more inclined to take the leap of faith of buying the final product. Demos don't build up expectation for a final game, nudging the curious into the 'must buy' camp; they can only achieve the opposite effect.

Statistics, in isolation and without seeing the science behind them, don't mean much – as George Canning once said, "I can prove anything by statistics except the truth." Does it help explain why demos have largely fallen by the wayside? Demos take time to make, and time means money. From a publisher's point of view, it must be somewhat perverse to spend money creating a demo where the best possible outcome is to discourage sales. An accidental side effect of demos drying up in recent years is that when they are launched they tend to receive more attention than they would have done otherwise. The *Dead Space 3* demo, for example, was downloaded over 2 million times.



■ *Hour Of Victory*'s demo proved damaging, embarrassingly pulled off XBLA then re-uploaded.

Demos for polarising titles will clearly alienate some of the audience. You don't need a crystal ball to see how demos for *Aliens: Colonial Marines* or *Resident Evil 6* would have impacted on sales. Yet, conversely, it's hard to see how games with low profiles or a large grey area in terms of gameplay won't have been pushed onto radars thanks to demos. *Ni No Kuni* rocketed to the top of the UK charts despite having the most unfriendly chart name imaginable, while *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* was relaunched to booing and hissing from fans – yet that initial negative reception was turned into eager anticipation. Demo launches were crucial milestones for both of those games.

But there is one final, vital argument in favour of demos. They're the last line of defence for the consumer in the face of micromanaged marketing campaigns, live-action trailers (not even CGI!) and pre-order bonuses. We are asked to commit earlier than ever while seeing less of what we're buying into. Demos do take time and money to create, but that's why they should be done properly, and if there is any confidence in the final product there shouldn't be any issue letting fans get their hands on a slice of the game before release. Having demos for all games is an idealistic goal, of course. At last, with PlayStation 4, it seems some publishers are admitting it and waking up to the power of the demo once more. Nintendo, alas, missed this boat with Wii U. So Microsoft? It's your move.

Ryan King is editor of NOWGamer.com



Arkham City sequel coming this autumn

Given the climax of Rocksteady's Batman: Arkham City, many wondered where the series would go next. Rumours of Rocksteady working on a Silver Age prequel – involving the formation of the Justice League and Batman's first encounter with Joker – set the internet ablaze; yet it was a Warner Bros investor call last month that revealed a new game is in the works, and that, more importantly, it will be released in 2013. Could this be the Rocksteady prequel, or a direct continuation of the story outsourced to another developer? The games™ readership discuss what they want from the next game.

"Hoping Rocksteady ditch the bigger open world and go for a more focused linear game like *Arkham Asylum* as I thought that worked much better."
Blakey, games™ forum

"Scarecrow, way too much underused, he was the highlight of *AA*!"
@AlacurdTepes, Twitter

"The return of the joker, if not I'll settle for the riddler as the main protagonist. Also sharks with laser beams."
@AstroMonkey1980, Twitter

"Seems very strange not to continue on from *Arkham City*, though. I don't know why but I feel weird if they dropped the story threads from *City* and just moved on to something else."
maf-me-quick, games™ forum

"More of Two Face and maybe Man Bat. Possibly Bane turning up and breaking Batman – then you have to fight your way back."
@Chocobo_sage, Twitter

"I've read the rumours about the Silver Age stuff and I'd be pretty interested if they took that direction. Personally though I would prefer to have a proper sequel that picks up from where the last game left off if I had the choice between the two."
Shadowman, games™ forum

BIT BY BIT
with Howard Scott Warshaw

Looking back to a simpler time of game development



I'm drinking Mai Tais on a beach in Hawaii (the south shore of Kauai, if you must know) when some not quite vestigial part of my brain activates and informs me thusly: "Hey, this is fun. Let's make it a game." That's how game design used to be performed. No tech docs. No committees. Just finding something fun and hoping it might translate in some way to the screen.

This process led to many creative sessions of goofing around in the hallway. We invented bocce lemons and spent not inconsiderable time creating banana vapour. Wall-walking was another hopeful endeavour. It was all in the name of hardcore R&D, trying to expand the horizons of the 2600… which we did.

Game design was a much more straightforward process then. We were just making one-screeners, despite sporting multiple screens in some cases, with simple yet repetitive (and hopefully addictive) play mechanisms which gamers might enjoy and ultimately purchase. We didn't have to deal with manifesting a substantial world in which to operate and there was no 'environmental concept' requiring a gargantuan art team. There was no way to 'finish' the game (except for *Adventure*). Just hit reset and attempt to answer the question: how high is UP?

For us back then it was all about playability (or 'fun' in the colloquial). Modern console game design is much more involved. It's primarily about realism in look and physics. I wouldn't call fun an afterthought exactly, but it's running a clear second. Why? Because people tend to do what they can do, and the truth is technical increments are much easier to assure than creative increments. We can measure things like polys per second, lag times and colour depth. We believe that more (or less) is better. It's better because it increases our potential gaming experience. Fair enough.

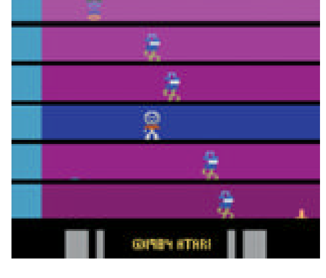
Yet it's what we do with such potential that determines our game's greatness, or lack thereof. That's where the fun comes in. More polys aren't fun until they get translated into engaging play. That's why design is so crucial. After all, would you rather play a great-looking lame game or a lame-looking great game? If your answer is "I would rather play a great-looking great game," then you are a player, not a developer.

Modern console game design is much more involved. It's primarily about realism in look and physics. I wouldn't call fun an afterthought exactly, but it's running a clear second

Way back in time, when dinosaurs roamed the labs, if I didn't like a gameplay I simply changed it. It wasn't a big deal because I was the entire design, art and engineering team. Now, change is much harder. A console development team is a juggernaut. Once your tech and design docs make it through the approval process, your target game concept has a lot of inertia. It's not that developers don't change anything as the game moves forward, but the range of possible changes is far narrower.

And whenever you change the gameplay you're guaranteed only one thing: the game is different. Did you make it more fun? That is much harder to measure.

There is one metric that is exactly the same today as it was then: sales, the ultimate metric. Easy to measure but hard to predict. Fortunately, each of my games sold over a million, even after accounting for returns! I was three for three. My fourth game, *Saboteur*, ping-ponged between original game and A-Team license long enough to get shelved when the company shut down during the great videogame recession of '84. Ultimately, *Saboteur* was dusted off, finished and released in this century and I hear it has done nicely.



Warshaw's *Saboteur* may hold the record for longest console game development at 21 years.

Which raises another interesting point. I thought I'd covered *ET* from all angles but here is a new one. Aside from being rated the worst game of all time it was also the fastest console game development of all time at five weeks. *Saboteur* was started in 1983 and was finally released for the first time on the Atari Flashback system in 2004. At 21 years I believe this is the longest console game development ever completed. I've not only done the worst game (*ET*) and the best game (*Yars' Revenge*), I've also done the fastest game (*ET*) and the slowest game (*Saboteur*). Further proof my range as a developer is unsurpassed. A dubious distinction perhaps, but a distinction nonetheless!

I wonder if my 2600 *Mai Tais On The Beach* game could be a million-seller as well? Hmm, quite possibly. Sometimes I think developers today just don't appreciate how easy us kids had it back in the day!

Howard Scott Warshaw is a videogames development veteran. He allegedly killed the games industry with *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*. We're sure he's sorry.



Grand Theft Auto V next-gen?

→Rockstar announces Grand Theft Auto V delay and official release date, raising rumours of a next-generation leap

1

7 September 2013. Rockstar has confirmed this to be the release date for the next entry in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, arriving some four months after the original launch window. The announcement has been met with equal parts excitement and spurious speculation: could *Grand Theft Auto V* be making the jump to the next-generation? If Microsoft joins Sony in aiming its next-gen console at the tail end of 2013, the hardware switch represents firm business logic. Rockstar has since dismissed such chatter with a vague statement: "To those of you saying or seeing various conspiracy theories about there being some other ulterior motive for this delay, rest assured that they're all nonsense; literally the only reason we've delayed the release is because we want the game to be as good as it needs to be." Whatever the truth of the matter, come 17 September the most eagerly anticipated game in years will finally arrive. Make a note of it.

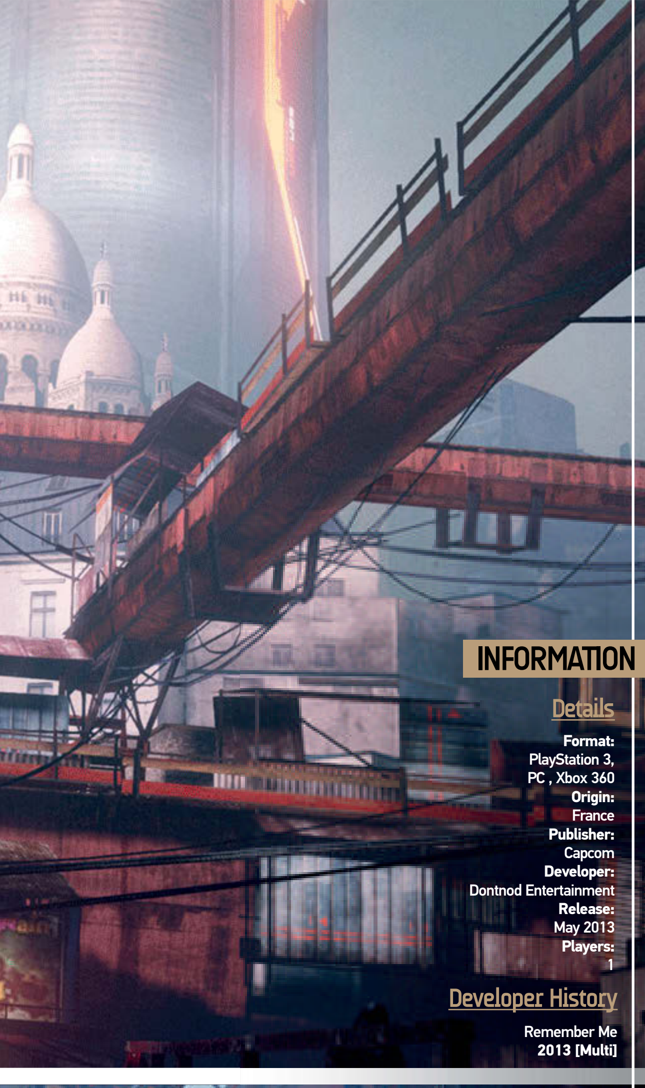
Nilin begins the game on the outskirts of Paris. With help from some new allies, she begins to make her way into the centre as she battles MemorEyes and government forces.

> "People say it's risky to launch at the end of a cycle… but at the same time, the biggest install base on the current gen is now"
>
> **JEAN-MAXIME MORIS** DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT



Mutants have been deformed by the SenSen technology implanted inside their skulls by the MemorEyes corporation.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, PC , Xbox 360
Origin: France
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Dontnod Entertainment
Release: May 2013
Players: 1

Developer History

Remember Me
2013 [Multi]

Developer Profile

Dontnod Entertainment is a recent Parisian outfit Kickstarted by Criterion Software's former head of developer relations, Oskar Guilbert, along with art director Aleksi Briclot and sci-fi writer Alain Damasio. The veterans have collectively worked across various titles, including *Rainbow 6*, *Splinter Cell*, *Heavy Rain* and *Burnout*. The studio initially secured an exclusive publishing deal with Sony; after creative differences, however, the developer separated from the publisher and brought the project to Gamescom 2011, which invited interest from Capcom among other notable publishers.

High Point

Given the lack of credentials to date, *Remember Me* will be make-or-break for the young team of designers.

Remember Me

CONCEPT ■ A memory hunting adventure set in Neo-Paris circa 2084. Issues surrounding identity, life and social networking are explored in between hitting people in the face.

Reflex memory

It seems that no matter how hard you try, you can't run from your past. At least that's one thematic thread underlining the multi-faceted yarn Dontnod Entertainment has weaved in *Remember Me*. But the developer itself has its own troubled history that it's no doubt spent the last year trying to forget.

Pitched to Sony as a PlayStation 3 platform exclusive (then under the title *Adrift*), it's no secret that the studio and publisher found themselves at odds over the direction of the game, resulting in the two parting ways early in 2011. *Remember Me* has since been through several iterations at Dontnod Entertainment. A previous gameplay walkthrough released last year revealed a modest open-world structure – an aspect that drew obvious comparisons to Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* – and various gameplay scenarios urging players to employ stealth tactics.

Design has since been stripped back to a less complex linear structure, with the developer focusing its attention on a series of unique features that elevate *Remember Me* above the genre norm. We've previously spoken of the various non-lethal abilities enabled by protagonist Nilin's wrist-mounted Spammer device, empowering her with a range of devastating moves – and unleashing one intriguing facet of her mysterious past. It's here that the core gameplay ideas are explored within an in-depth customisable combo creator. But first, some exposition.

The game's female protagonist, Nilin, starts off unconscious and locked within a prison cell in the depths of some clandestine laboratory, having had her memory almost completely wiped by the corrupt technological organisation MemorEyes; 'Trust us, we won't forget you' is their rather apposite corporate slogan. As one of the few memory hunters employed by these same corporations, she escapes with the aid of mysterious friend Edge, who invites Nilin to join the Errorists – a group at the forefront of the rebellion, looking to employ Nilin and her unique abilities to fight against her former employer.

Having managed to escape full memory erasure at the facility, Nilin finds herself surrounded by mutant cast-offs of MemorEyes, contorted by the SenSen technology implanted in their heads – connecting each mind to an online network – and living on the fringes of society. Nilin adds to their woes, battering these creatures to escape back into the main metropolis. It's here that the much-vaunted customisable combo system is introduced. With over 50,000 potential combinations to be created, there's an unprecedented depth to the system that understandably needs clear tutelage.

But even with a few simple one-button combos to begin with, the process of unlocking and assigning prompts isn't instantly clear. Combos are broken down into three groups: power, health and cooldown. As players progress, mixing these three designations becomes key to surviving encounters and defeating combo-specific enemy types. But the visual presentation lacks the immediate accessibility necessary for such a fundamental system to work.

/// Thankfully, it's not as obtuse at it sounds once in the midst of battle. Combat is more reminiscent of *Batman: Arkham City* or *Assassin's Creed* than *Bayonetta* or *Devil May Cry*; but lacking the several pounds of armour Batman adorns or all those layers constituting Ezio's overly finessed garb, Nilin is noticeably lighter to control, her actions more fluid and rapid than her genre stablemates. The combo system ultimately enables players to construct their own moves, which personalises the combat with a varying range of skill.

Nilin unlocks further combo options by accumulating PNP from fallen foes. Chain together enough kicks and punches and Nilin will perform a finishing move that saps memories from enemies, maximising the amount of PNP she receives. This also enables Nilin to unlock her special powers, the majority of which are being kept tightly under wraps by the developer.

Now aligned with the Errorists, Nilin sets about finding out what happened to her and why half of Neo-Paris's law enforcement seems to

be hunting her down. It's no surprise that the city itself is evocative of go-to sci-fi fable *Blade Runner*, but there's plenty of punk to counteract the cyber, and Paris is fertile ground in which to explore ideas of technological paranoia, identity and the proliferation of social networks. Orwellian overtones of oppression can be seen everywhere: security cameras monitor all corners and propaganda adorns walls alongside defiant graffiti. Dontnod has a clear appreciation for cyberpunk fiction that translates into an immersive world.

/// Navigating through the dense underbelly of the city is straightforward; Nilin's path is clearly defined, reminiscent of *Uncharted*'s tightly controlled cinematic platforming. Extended sequences of traversal are interspersed with brief skirmishes and dynamic scenarios, presented to prevent platform segments devolving into routine A-to-B travel. The camera elegantly glides around Nilin to effectively sustain tension and amp drama when required – occasionally to the point of obtrusiveness – but with its strait-laced fiction and captivating backdrop, *Remember Me*'s punchy presentation elevates the material beyond mere mimicry.

One of the game's defining features is its Memory Remix sequences. Each chapter of the game either concludes with a boss battle or a Memory Remix, but while the former is a ubiquitous genre staple, the latter introduces an intriguing puzzle element to juxtapose the core action. We're treated to orchestrating the first Memory Remix players will come across in the game; at this point Nilin has joined the Errorists and MemorEyes has already dispatched a female agent to kill Nilin, who finds Nilin donning her combat skin at a bar called the Leaking Brain. Fighting off the attack, Nilin imbeds herself within the agent's consciousness, exploring the assassin's mind both to discover why she has been targeted and to alter her memories.

The assassin's memories reveal her to be a bounty hunter, whose motivation is to claim the reward and pay for her sick husband's surgery. Further exploration of the memory divulges that her husband suffered an accident, which wiped his memory, forcing him to undergo expensive memory transfusion surgery. Players use the analogue sticks to search back and forth through the memory, finding key points in which Nilin can alter events to change the mindset of that particular person.

Several opportunities arise, each highlighted by a distortion effect that indicates an interactive element. It's clear that a specific chain of events need to occur in order to reach the correct outcome and manipulate the memory in Nilin's favour. However, the concern here is that the constant replaying of the event could produce a concerning amount of gameplay repetitiveness.

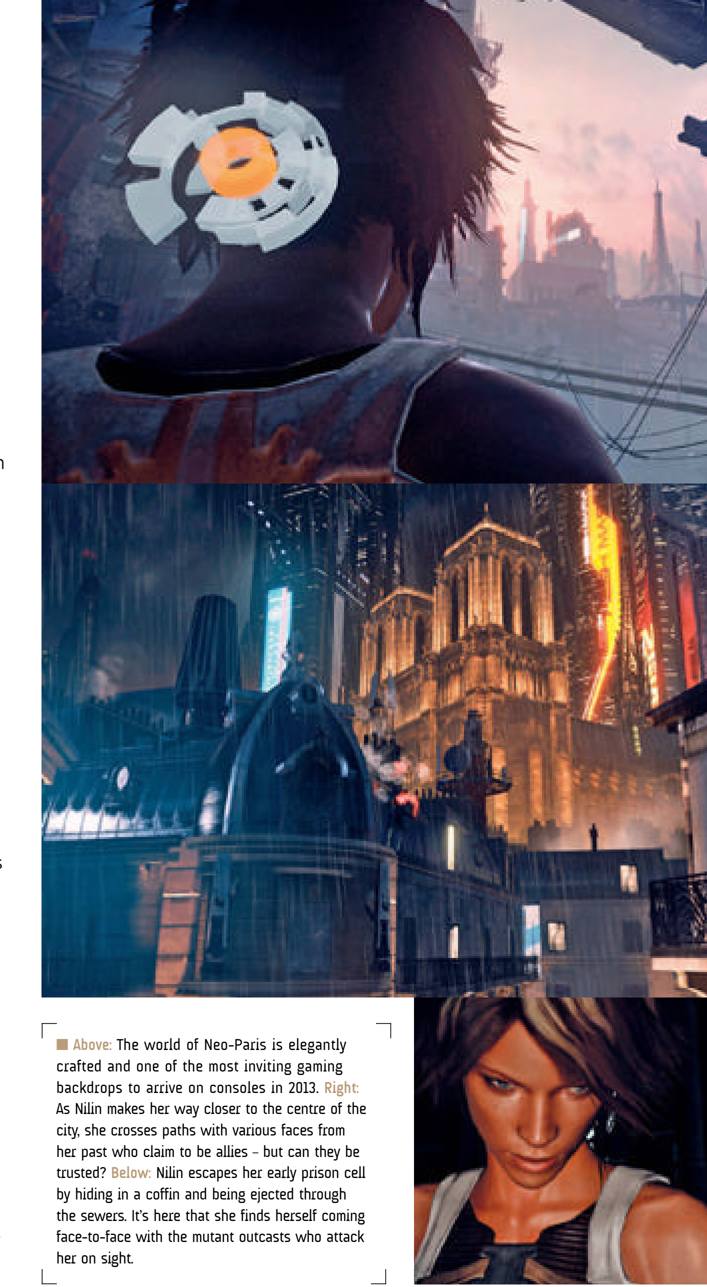
That wasn't the case in the first of the game's Memory Remixes, with changes that players can make throughout the memory being relatively minor on this occasion – a table can be moved, an arm restraint unbuckled – but it's the precise combination of elements that can ultimately cause the whole event to be altered within the subject's mind, resulting in irrevocable damage to the psyche. Icons appear at the bottom of the screen to indicate which adjustment has had an impact, and in this case the sequence of events has resulted in the patient flatlining in front of his wife.

With her memory now entirely changed, the bounty hunter's motivation to kill Nilin evaporates along with her real thoughts, replaced with a new impetus to join the Errorists in the fight against the corporation at the root of her husband's illness. It's a tenuous plot device, but the moral quandaries raised are certainly interesting if Dontnod decide to explore them comprehensively.

> "There were five of us with an ambition to do a triple-A game on a console"
> JEAN-MAXIME MORIS DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT

It's back in the present that we gain a glimpse of a little further ahead in the game, as Nilin ventures towards an affluent shopping district in Paris – full of boutique shops and faithful robot servants carrying shopping for their unappreciative fleshy owners. Nilin is now top of the most wanted list, but must infiltrate these upper echelons of the higher class to gain intel from a valid source.

Arguably, *Remember Me*'s greatest asset is its setting. The Parisian studio has clearly indulged itself in reimagining its homeland lost within a bleak futuristic vision. It looks fantastic. The attention to detail across each district of the city is not only palpable, but presents a surprising amount of variation across class divides and accurate geography. When broken down into its constituent parts, *Remember Me*'s influences are readily apparent. A touch of *Batman: Arkham City* here, a little of *Uncharted* there, a dash of *Mirror's Edge* to boot. But *Remember Me* combines together elements of each of these within a rich fiction that rarely strays into derivative. *Remember Me* is quickly becoming one of the most enticing gaming prospects of 2013.



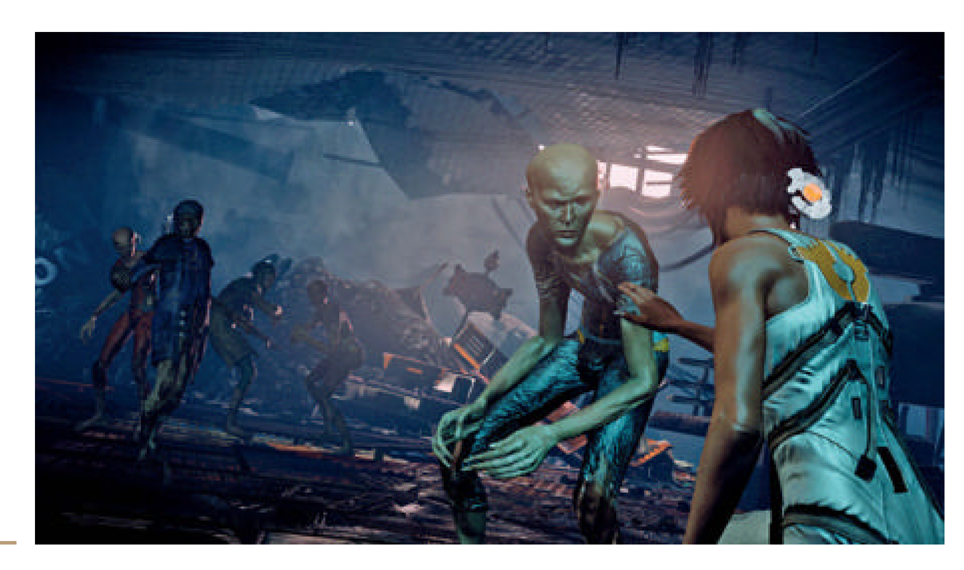
■ Above: The world of Neo-Paris is elegantly crafted and one of the most inviting gaming backdrops to arrive on consoles in 2013. Right: As Nilin makes her way closer to the centre of the city, she crosses paths with various faces from her past who claim to be allies – but can they be trusted? Below: Nilin escapes her early prison cell by hiding in a coffin and being ejected through the sewers. It's here that she finds herself coming face-to-face with the mutant outcasts who attack her on sight.



■ Right: Combat bears close resemblance to *Batman: Arkham City* and *Assassin's Creed*. However, the agility of Nilin ups the tempo of action.

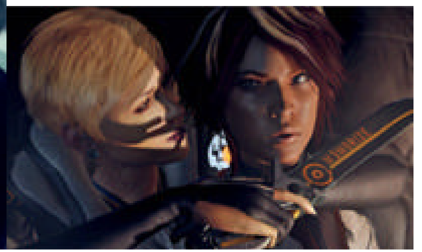
COMBO COMPLEXITY

SPEAKING WITH games™ in late 2012, Dontnod Entertainment's Jean-Maxime Moris intriguingly hints at a higher level in the combat system that delves beyond the combos and special abilities that Nilin possesses: "There will be a third layer [to combat] that will bring the depth even further," he alludes. "But I can't talk about it right now. Basically, it's those different levels of depth we want to reward the casual as well as the hardcore. There is a level of accessibility and fluidity, and then we expand with our personality, special moves and what's coming next."





Left: The Memory Remix sequences bookend several chapters of the game's story. An intriguing concept for an extended puzzle sequence, it remains to be seen whether the mechanics prove repetitive. Dontnod has opted for a cinematic presentation of the sequences. The pleasure is in watching how each tiny change to the scenario will affect the overall outcome of the memory, and how it usually transforms the subject into a gibbering wreck.





GUN NOT

DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT'S Jean-Maxime Moris explains why guns are absent in *Remember Me*: "There are no guns in the game. Guns have been forbidden in Paris 2084 except for special memory ceremonies," he says. "They appear in one of the Memory Remix sequences you've seen. [Nilin] doesn't kill anyone except for that guy in the memory, and we'll see how that choice in that point in her life affected her. She doesn't kill anyone. We wanted to stay away from the generic violence that has invaded games. We wanted to differentiate ourselves from other third-person action-adventure games."

Killer Is Dead

CONCEPT ■ Suda51 takes us back into the mind of a deranged killer, this time drawing from the elements established in *No More Heroes* and *Killer7*.

Are you ready to kill a killer?

A **Suda51 game brings with it certain expectations.** It's a fact that any players of *Killer7, Shadows Of The Damned* or even *Lollipop Chainsaw* can attest to; if Suda51 or his studio Grasshopper Manufacture are gracing the credits, it's probably best to leave your brain at the door and get ready for a deliriously entertaining journey to insanity.

Like *Killer7* and *No More Heroes* before it, *Killer Is Dead* adopts an anime-tinged cel-shaded aesthetic, combined with an overwhelming level of brutality, to deliver the quirky brand of violence that has become synonymous with a Suda title. Sure, the sheer velocity at which gore is presented isn't for everyone, but if you're after an unhinged story then you need not look any further; the way Suda presents violence really is poetry in motion.

Set in a near future where cyber enhancements have become the norm, *Killer Is Dead* stars robotically modified Mondo Zappa as he brawls and guns his way through the Lunar undercity at the behest of the Brian Execution Firm. The firm, run by half-cyborg Brian Roses, is a secret organisation dedicated to the assassination of world-famous assassins. The irony certainly isn't lost on us. Throwing us into this shadowy world is going to lend itself to one hell of a zero-to-hero journey.

Sure, at first it seems Mondo's journey may mirror that of *No More Heroes*' a little too closely for comfort, but this is the latest title in Suda's 'assassin' series after all. All indications point to *Killer Is Dead* picking right up from where *No More Heroes* and *Killer7* left off – a trail of blood if we've ever seen one.

/// Stylistically, *Killer Is Dead* looks more like a fairly comprehensive HD upgrade of *No More Heroes*, while tonally whisking us back to the days of GameCube/PlayStation 2 classic *Killer7*; if ever there was a game we'd been waiting for a spiritual sequel to, it was this one.

An underground legion of assassin killers with a penchant for bloody violence isn't Suda enough for you? Let's talk firepower. Mondo could easily rival any of the seven found in *Killer7*, equipped with a cybernetic katana in his right hand for some close-combat slicing and an embedded weapon in his left, he's prepared for any situation. The embedded enhancement can be upgraded throughout the campaign, allowing you to convert it into a drill or *Mega Man*-style arm cannon, among other things. Mondo will also have plenty of power-ups at his disposal; his cybernetic weapons can absorb and store the blood of his enemies, using it to rampage through flesh and bone whenever desired.

This is incredibly handy considering the variety of killers he'll be aiming to take down, from sociopaths searching for their final death to geniuses with a taste for murder. In fact, at one point we're fairly certain we caught a glimpse of a 'beautiful woman with devilish hands'… 14 of them in fact. Yikes.

> "His ultimate goal is to execute various heinous criminals scattered around the world and beyond"
> XSEED PRESS RELEASE

Even at this early stage, *Killer Is Dead* already looks like an avant-garde romp through the kind of hell we'd like to visit on a daily basis. The brief trailers only allude to the sort of deviant and sexually divisive plot that Suda loves to instil upon his faithful followers, but he isn't likely to disappoint in that respect.

We've still got a few months to wait until *Killer Is Dead* hits shelves. At this stage it's already looking like one of 2013's more intriguing titles, and, thanks to some recent changes with publishers, we can also expect a worldwide release – no more waiting months to get a taste.

Unchained creativity or borderline depravity? We'd like to think *Killer Is Dead* is going to be a lot of both.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

An unlikely start to a developer's story, Goichi Suda – or Suda51, as he's more commonly known – was an undertaker before joining Human Entertainment to work on the *Fire Pro Wrestling* series. After a series of successful games, Suda created Grasshopper Manufacture and has since put his mind to some of the most unhinged games of the generation.

Developer History

Lollipop Chainsaw **2012 [Xbox 360, Playstation 3]**
Shadows Of The Damned **2011 [Xbox 360, Playstation 3]**
No More Heroes **2008 [Wii]**
Killer7 **2005 [GameCube, PlayStation 2]**
Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special **1994 [SNES]**

High Point

Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special gave us a stark look at the power of a Suda51 story, as he led a tired wrestling champion to suicide.





■ Right: *Killer Is Dead* utilises an upgraded *No More Heroes* engine to give it a distinctive anime-inspired style.

INTRODUCING A KILLER

MONDO ZAPPA is sitting front and centre of *Killer Is Dead*, a 35-year-old man who unwittingly receives an invitation to join an underground clan of assassin killers. With a suave style about him that wouldn't look out of place on TV's *Mad Men*, he's not your conventional kind of murderer – though his *Mega Man*-esque arm cannon sure does help things along. Suda51 has stressed his desire to tell a more human story this time around, which, after the madness of *Lollipop Chainsaw* and *Shadows Of The Damned*, is certainly no bad thing. Saying that, he acts like a womanising scumbag in the trailer – though with a 14-armed assassin running around on the loose, we imagine he'll have his hands full.

Above: Mondo's cybernetic arm is likely to cause plenty of carnage. Whether it's attaching a huge drill to take down heavily armoured assassins or simply a gun packing some serious heat, it's going to be hella fun to control. Below: Mondo will carry more style than substance, but that's all right, because he's looking very dapper, dressed to the nines for bloody murder.



■ Above: *Tearaway* looks to utilise the majority of the Vita's technological functionality. ■ Below: Media Molecule recently announced the addition of Iota's female counterpart, Atoi. Don't go expecting the second character to indicate the inclusion of multiplayer; Media Molecule maintains this is a single-player only experience.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS Vita
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Media Molecule
Release: TBA 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Perhaps the greatest feat of Guildford-based studio Media Molecule is that, despite its prominent success collaborating with Sony, the developer has remained a modest indie-sized outfit. *LittleBigPlanet* catapulted Media Molecule into the limelight as one of the freshest creative studios working in the UK today.

Developer History

Tearaway
2013 [PS Vita]

LittleBigPlanet 2
2011 [PlayStation 3]

LittleBigPlanet
2008 [PlayStation 3]

High Point

Its sequel was inarguably the better game, but *LittleBigPlanet* would define this console generation with its jocund motto of 'Play. Create. Share.'

Tearaway

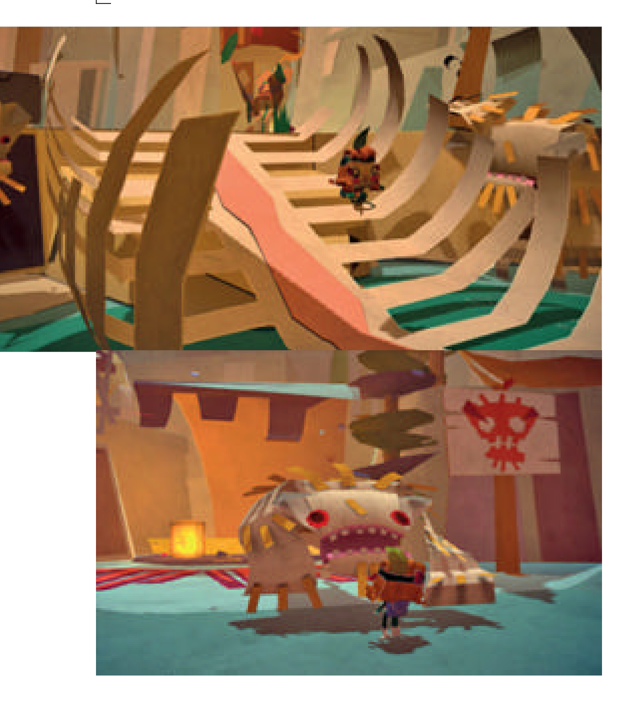
CONCEPT ■ A third-person adventure set within a paper world that peels away piece-by-piece.

Proving a cut above for PS Vita

It's impossible to understate the impact that *LittleBigPlanet* has had on PlayStation 3. Media Molecule's woollen wonderland of do-it-yourself adventure gaming awarded the console with its most inimitable hit, introduced the publisher's most amiable mascot and played no small part in the cultivation of its creative community that would participate in defining a gaming generation.

PS Vita has yet to procure such a momentous software release; its bells-and-whistles Swiss Army knife design has yet to be utilised efficaciously to demonstrate its latent capabilities. Media Molecule understands this, crafting its newest IP *Tearaway* from the ground up for Sony's new-fangled portable console to specifically exhibit the creative avenues that the system offers players.

Aesthetically, *Tearaway* looks very much part of Media Molecule's DNA: an ebullient, creative landscape bursting with eccentricity. Inspired by the copious amount of paperwork infesting the studio's Guildford offices, the entire world is comprised of paper structures and characters that can be bent, folded and dismantled at the player's will. Players control Iota (or his female equivalent, Atoi), a messenger whose envelope





head contains a message unique to each player, destined to be revealed at the end of the game.

Before that, though, players will have to guide the hero through some dicey terrain. One such location is Sogport, a seaport that has players rubbing folds with fishermen and sailors, while avoiding mythical monsters known as wendigos. These crazed pieces of card have a few too many sharp edges, thrashing across the environment and threatening to push players into the toxic ocean that surrounds the vibrant locale. They're easily taken care off with a well-placed pearl; lobbing one of these apparently tasty stones onto a target lures the beasts into a trap where they'll be neatly gift wrapped.

It's clear that the direction is that of a more traditional third-person platformer. Iota gently folds the landscape with every step, while battling enemies and solving environmental puzzles to progress through the game – find a wall plastered with sticky tape and Iota can scale it as easily as even ground. But there's room for innovation between the linearity of the game's storyline and structure; much has been made of the interplay between reality and the game world, inviting a tangible relationship between the player and the scenery.

/// The world isn't without its physical forces. While winds can gently blow platforms across a stage – manipulated by an accordion Iota can play – players can use the multifaceted functionality of the Vita to change the world. In certain areas of the game, touching the rear touchpad causes a giant digit to tear into the scenery, which is useful for driving enemies away or pushing obstacles across the screen. There are also contextual spots in the world that react to the player's touch.

But Media Molecule has extended this concept beyond just tapping the screen. One use of the accelerometer changes the perspective of the world view when the Vita is held vertically, while players are encouraged to re-texture parts of the environment by importing photos and designs. Players can also download and print a paper model at the close of each stage to be assembled as a real-world physical representation of their in-game journey. It adds some recognisable creative flair to the studio's inaugural Vita release.

"You, the player, can literally get stuck in using all of PS Vita's novel inputs"
MEDIA MOLECULE

Beyond this, there's a rich and uniquely involving mythology underlining the whole adventure. Folk tales, poems and music have all been key in the direction of the game, as much as Saturday mornings watching children's TV and lazy Sundays spent perusing Hobbycraft. *Tearaway* even features its own alphabet that can be deciphered if you wish. It's a game that is founded on a clear love of crafting something unique; not an unfamiliar ideal from the *LittleBigPlanet* developer, but it's one that hasn't served them wrong in the past.

Below Enemies appear to require more puzzle-centric means of dispatch. Monsters can be easily lured into traps with the promise of a tasty pearl.



FLAT PACK GAME DESIGN

THE WORLD of *Tearaway* is one of creases, jagged edges and folds, lending the world a captivating texture that looks handcrafted by the developers. Media Molecule has developed a new engine to support the game, rendering all the shapes as actual craft plans. That means that any structure is folded, taped and tucked as if it were a real paper model. The game essentially builds each model as the game loads, adding an unprecedented degree of detail. There aren't many texture maps used in the game either; instead, everything is formed of polygons, adding to the geometric precision of the entire *Tearaway* universe.





Left: Alongside the environmental and texture modifications, there is a level of customisation to the main character, enabling players to plaster the protagonist with all manner of useless affectations.



THE KILLING JOKE

NEVERREALM'S *MORTAL Kombat* series has a unique pace and simplicity to its combat, and that looks to continue in *Injustice*. Varied attacks play to each character's strength, with both gadget-centric and power combatants. A special bar is filled by landing enough attacks, which unleashes a special attack – such as Batman flattening opponents with the Batmobile – that drains 30 per cent of the enemy's health bar.

Injustice: Gods Among Us

CONCEPT *Mortal Kombat* developer NeverRealm unites DC's greatest superheroes in a royal rumble of spectacular proportions.

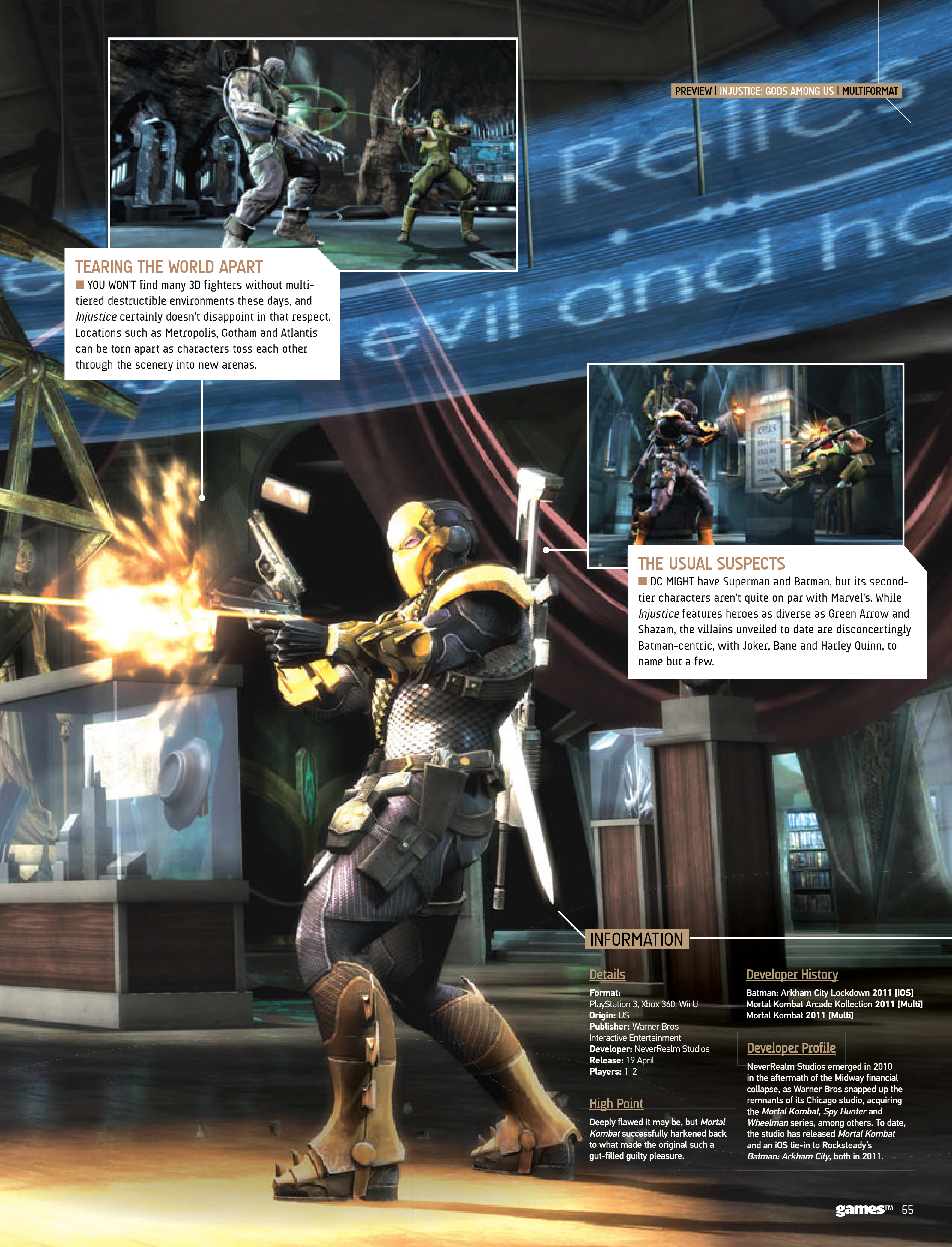
NeverRealm Studios asks, "Why so serious?"

Who would win in a fight between Superman and Batman? Well, Superman obviously. But just imagine for a moment that every member of DC's pantheon of spandex-clad vigilantes and ne'er-do-wells was so uniformly nerfed that each stood on an even keel when pitted against one another in an arena deathmatch.

That's the basic premise of the dissonantly titled *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, which, due to the handling of its source material, has predictably attracted a level of ire usually reserved for duplicitous politicians, vile psychopaths and sexual content in Square Enix games.

The story shares a striking parity to Mark Millar's 2006 *Civil War* run of comics for Marvel: in the wake of the destruction of Metropolis and the death of Lois Lane and her unborn child, Superman enforces a new world order that meets resistance from Batman, severing the DC universe into two rival factions. The plot also finds time to rationalise why Batman can go toe-to-toe with Superman without the Man Of Steel vaporising DC's most profitable hero in a millisecond.

It's a surprisingly multifarious narrative considering *Injustice*'s genre trappings, with substantial cut-scenes bookending each 3D skirmish. *Injustice* aligns with the mascot-vaunting clutter of technically sub-par fighters that welcome accessibility over obtuse combat, but elevates itself over those standards with an involving storyline usually absent from the genre. Whether or not it'll have the gameplay clout to live-up to the promise of its roster remains to be seen.



TEARING THE WORLD APART

YOU WON'T find many 3D fighters without multi-tiered destructible environments these days, and *Injustice* certainly doesn't disappoint in that respect. Locations such as Metropolis, Gotham and Atlantis can be torn apart as characters toss each other through the scenery into new arenas.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

DC MIGHT have Superman and Batman, but its second-tier characters aren't quite on par with Marvel's. While *Injustice* features heroes as diverse as Green Arrow and Shazam, the villains unveiled to date are disconcertingly Batman-centric, with Joker, Bane and Harley Quinn, to name but a few.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii U
Origin: US
Publisher: Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
Developer: NeverRealm Studios
Release: 19 April
Players: 1-2

High Point

Deeply flawed it may be, but *Mortal Kombat* successfully harkened back to what made the original such a gut-filled guilty pleasure.

Developer History

Batman: Arkham City Lockdown 2011 [iOS]
Mortal Kombat Arcade Kollection 2011 [Multi]
Mortal Kombat 2011 [Multi]

Developer Profile

NeverRealm Studios emerged in 2010 in the aftermath of the Midway financial collapse, as Warner Bros snapped up the remnants of its Chicago studio, acquiring the *Mortal Kombat, Spy Hunter* and *Wheelman* series, among others. To date, the studio has released *Mortal Kombat* and an iOS tie-in to Rocksteady's *Batman: Arkham City*, both in 2011.

"Promising a 'fanciful world of yarn and textiles', the footage already looks beautiful – it's literally bursting at the seams with cutesy style"

■ While we really enjoyed *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, there's no denying it was a little easy. Hopefully Yoshi's transition to the Wii U will be as challenging as we remember *Yoshi's Island* to be.

Yarn Yoshi

CONCEPT ■ Yoshi makes his grand return to gaming, ditching the pop-up storybook of *Yoshi's Story* and arriving in full HD knitwear.

Unravelling a new adventure

We've been waiting a long time to delve back into a world with Yoshi from the comfort of our sofas, 15 years in fact, and it looks like Nintendo is finally giving him another run at a solo career.

Nintendo EAD is handing the reigns over to Good-Feel, the studio responsible for taking Kirby into the knitwear realm back in 2010 with *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, a fun if not underappreciated adventure. Promising a "fanciful world of yarn and textiles", the early footage already looks beautiful – it's literally bursting at the seams with cutesy style.

Yoshi, as always, will be able to eat everything and anything in sight with his extendable tongue, granting him different powers and abilities. While you begin the levels as a 2D yarn-wireframe dinosaur, certain objects will transform Yoshi into a fully knitted 3D character; it's tough not to smile as you see the transformation. Enemies explode into strands of yarn as you jump on them, and while only a small amount of footage was shown, we can only assume the environments will behave in a similar manner to those in Kirby's adventure. It's strangely satisfying to pull an unreachable platform closer by tugging a loose thread in the world, crumpling the fabrics of reality together.

Without Baby Mario in sight, it looks like *Yarn Yoshi* will return to the character's high-score chasing days of *Yoshi's Story* as opposed to the platform-centric play we all fell in love with through *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*. With original series director Takashi Tezuka on board in a supervisory role, *Yarn Yoshi* will at least be a faithful reimagining for the overlooked dino, hopefully blending together the puzzle and story-driven elements found in his previous two Yoshi games with glorious results.

Of all the characters in the wide Nintendo roster, Yoshi is perhaps the best choice to make the transition to tapestry. *Yoshi's Story* captured our hearts with its world born from a pop-up story book, and suffice to say the knitted world seems to suit the titular character perfectly.

After the Wii U's slow start, it's great to see Nintendo diversifying its line-up. Utilising fan-favourite characters of yesteryear is a sure-fire way to bring back support from the core audience. Good-Feel is onto a winner with *Yarn Yoshi*. It's already captured our attention with its unmistakable style; we're just hopeful the developer makes use of the license and really expands upon the mechanics found in *Kirby's Epic Yarn*. The last thing Nintendo can afford to do this time around is play it safe.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Good-Feel
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

First introduced on *Super Mario World*s Dinosaur Island, Yoshi is the dino companion to plumber bros Mario and Luigi. After a popular debut, Yoshi made the transition to a solo adventure, ferrying Baby Mario around on a grand adventure. Yoshi hasn't had much love over the years, condemned to tennis games and karting races, but now he's going solo once again.



Developer History

Yoshi Touch & Go **2007 [DS]**

MGS: Snake Eater 3D **2005 [GC]**

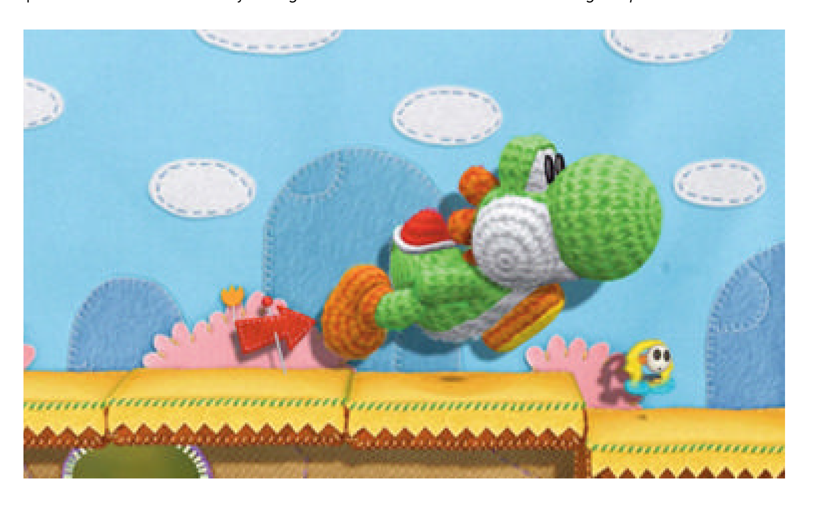
Super Mario 64 DS **2004 [DS]**

Yoshi's Story **1997 [N64]**

Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island **1995 [Wii]**

High Point

Mario and Luigi's first steps onto Dinosaur Island were disastrous; thankfully a hero born of a green-spotted egg helped to save the day.





■ Above: *Yarn Yoshi* looks fantastic on Wii U. If ever there was a character and aesthetic style to benefit from Nintendo's transition to HD, it's the ones found here. Left: It's hard not to fall completely head over heels with *Yarn Yoshi*; its style breeds an intoxicating smile.



Below: The snippet of the single-player campaign didn't leave a huge amount of time to get to know the characters, but they seemed to lack the distinctiveness of previous Insomniac personalities.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: EA
Developer: Insomniac Games
Release: Q2 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Insomniac has established itself over recent years as one of Sony's pivotal external collaborators, providing cutesy platformers in the form of *Ratchet & Clank* and *Spyro*, and its chief first-person shooter series, *Resistance*. Recently, the California-based studio has branched out with free-to-play Facebook game *Outernauts*, the first collaboration between the developer and EA that will continue with this year's *Fuse*.

Developer History

Outernauts **2012 [PC]**
Resistance: Fall Of Man **2006 [PS3]**
Ratchet & Clank **2002 [PS2]**
Spyro The Dragon **1998 [PSone]**

High Point

Ratchet & Clank first displayed Insomniac's knack for inventive weaponry and wry humour – a tradition that continues to this day.

Fuse

CONCEPT Insomniac's latest shooter once again satiates the studio's appetite for high-concept military arsenal in a squad-based third-person shooter.

Weapon of choice

"Every one of our intellectual properties has gone through massive changes," states Insomniac Games' CEO Ted Price, "It's just that *Fuse* had the most public change." He's not wrong. For anyone not up to speed with the developments of the *Resistance* studio's third-person shooter, the story goes like this: announced on the global platform that is E3 in 2011 as playful co-op blaster *Overstrike*, it was re-unveiled 12 months later as *Fuse* – dropping the tomfoolery in favour of some generic, *Mass Effect*-flavoured sci-fi pretentiousness.

But aside from stern-grimaced protagonists and steely aesthetics, much of what made Insomniac's shooter such an enticing project – namely the inventiveness of its arsenal – remains gloriously intact. An emphasis on unconventional weapons has been a mainstay of the studio's output since *Ratchet & Clank*, growing more imperative to the *Resistance* series as it continued, and in *Fuse* remains the allure of the core gameplay.

Each of the four playable characters has a unique equipment loadout that endows certain battlefield benefits: Dalton has a defensive energy shield that emits a powerful shockwave; Izzy is packing a Shatter gun that freezes enemies to the spot; Jacob is wielding the Arc Shot that fires high-temperature bolts, and Naya's weapon creates small black holes that eviscerate enemies.

Echelon mode sets four players against a series of increasingly difficult challenges across several maps. It's a thinly veiled variation on the prevalent Horde mode.

"We love our weapons," enthuses Price after **games™** partakes in a lengthy match of Echelon mode, a Horde-like round-based game. "[After] we re-unveiled it in 2012 we were able to amp up the punch on our weapons. An example of doing this was taking what was originally the Glue Gun for Izzy Sinclair – an *Incredibles*-inspired gun, which wasn't particularly fun – and changed it from glue to a weapon that could turn enemies into crystallised structures that can shatter. All of a sudden that weapon became so much more fun to use because it delivered that satisfaction when you take out enemies, becoming much more of a crowd-control weapon."

Balance is fundamental to the relationship between the four characters, possessing equipment that complements each other in battle without individually feeling undernourished. While this contributes to a robust co-operative experience, it compels lonesome players braving the single-player campaign to experiment with characters using the Leap function – enabling players to switch between the protagonists on the fly. "We wanted to design a game where you can easily play by yourself with three bots, or play with one, two or three friends," says Price. "That's why we test all configurations constantly.

"Personally, I play single-player a lot," he adds. "I enjoy that in particular because I can leap back and forth. It lets me experience the game in different ways."



"We love very different types of games across the company, and we bring that love and variety into all our titles"

TED PRICE INSOMNIAC GAMES



■ Victory Games has confirmed its intentions to move onto *Red Alert* and *Tiberium* after the relaunch of the *Generals* brand.

■ Below: The Frostbite Engine does one thing very well: explosions. There are plenty of them in *Command & Conquer*, with a spectacle incomparable in the RTS genre.

Command & Conquer

CONCEPT ■ The war machine returns to the PC in a free-to-play revival of the classic strategy RTS.

games™ discusses the free-to-play reboot of Command & Conquer with Victory Games' Tim Morten

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: EA
Developer: Victory Games
Release: TBA 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Unveiled as the third developer to tackle the *Command & Conquer* series, internal EA studio Victory Games was once known as BioWare Victory under the management of ex-Trion Worlds developer Jon Van Caneghem. The developer has since reverted back to its original name, and is dedicated to overseeing the future development of *Command & Conquer* and its various incarnations.

Developer History

Command & Conquer
2013 [PC]

High Point

With *Command & Conquer* being the studio's first release, time will tell whether the franchise is in safe hands.

Making the transition to free-to-play, Victory Games' *Command & Conquer* has plenty of challenges to face before it is released later in the year. It has to successfully reinvent the classic RTS franchise for a new generation while running the risk of alienating its long-serving community, with the implementation of a monetisation system and the prospect of drip-fed features being sure to cause fervent, polarising debate. But discussing the redesign, Victory's senior development director Tim Morten states that *Command & Conquer* is the first step in the brand's radical evolution.

How has the game evolved since its original announcement at Gamescom?

We're still in the alpha phase of development, but we've just had a group of core community members out from around the globe and got some preliminary feedback that was very encouraging. So we feel good about that. I would say that at this point we're focused on the core fundamentals and making the game fun. We've still got some rough edges to work through, but we're very excited about the level we're at now.

What do you think is core to the *Command & Conquer* series to appeal to both the community and newcomers?

It's a long laundry list of features. I think first and foremost it's the visceral feel of those core mechanics. It has to feel satisfying to go out and destroy structures, destroy units and build your base. We've invested a lot of effort into the build-up animations, the dynamic destruction, the variety of combat

> "From an RTS perspective there's just a level of reality to the world that's unprecedented"
> TIM MORTEN VICTORY GAMES

that you can experience while you're out on the battlefield. But when you talk about core community that's a beginning, there's also a number of expectations in terms of diversity of faction units, in terms of balance and breadth of features. We started over with a whole new engine, so we got nothing for free from the old games. We really had to go through one-by-one and make sure that we ticked the boxes on what the community expects.

But then there's a challenge shifting the licence into the free-to-play model without alienating the fanbase.

Yes, absolutely. We've gotten a lot of feedback suggesting that pay-to-win is a big sensitivity on part of the audience. Even as game players ourselves we absolutely don't want to find ourselves in a position where people who have paid money will have an advantage over us in an engagement simply because they've got more money. We've been very careful how we matchmake to ensure that people get pitted against opponents on a comparable level of units and abilities. For us, the first focus is making it fun and then working out how to adapt it to free-to-play.

Why did you decide to go free-to-play in the first place?

It's two things, really. The first was wanting to make it accessible to a broader audience. Speaking personally from my gaming habits, there's a tendency to be willing to try stuff if there's no cost involved, and I've gotten really into games that I otherwise probably would not have paid $60 for at retail. I think that's one of the great things about the free-to-play model.

The other thing is this sense of connected experience. We got it to a certain extent with the boxed product, but with the live service there's a heightened level of social engagement. The most frustrating thing in the world as a developer is to invest two years of development time into a product and then having to move onto the next one. With this *Command & Conquer* reboot we're really planning to commit the next five, ten, however many years to the title as long as the consumer has a desire for the content.

Don't you feel that's an incredible commitment to make for a game of this nature?

Right now we're so excited to see what the fan reaction is going to be so perhaps the reality hasn't set in. We've got a road map that has a good deal of content ahead of when we launch, so we have a backlog of other things to deliver over time – big ideas about new factions, new universes. It's pretty exciting.



The free-to-play business model ensures that EA and Victory Games will continue to support the game for a number of years with various content drops and improvements to the core systems.

Inset: Gameplay remains relatively unchanged from the classic *Command & Conquer* formula: building structures and units, and gradually invading other areas of the map until you dominate the battleground.

MOVING ONTO FROSTBITE

FOR VICTORY Games, one of the biggest challenges was adapting the first-person Frostbite Engine for a real-time strategy game. "As a first-person shooter engine there are a lot of aspects to overcome," says Tim Morten. "The mouse was hooked up to the view, which is no good for real-time strategy where you've got to place the structures. We had to invest the time to work in the engine as a real-time strategy game. Once we got there the level of visuals that it facilitates is just incredible. You almost don't appreciate the full scope of work that goes into these assets from the RTS perspective, but we let you zoom in and really see the detail. From an RTS perspective there's just a level of reality to the world that's unprecedented. "

The new EU faction forgoes the standard ratio power, instead powering its unit and structures based on proximity. That's right. The EU is advancing ahead of the rest of the world.





■ Above: The world maps are expansive, though don't get too distracted gawking at the environments: pesky enemies wander around looking to ruin your day. Thankfully you can avoid battles with a bit of quick movement.

Tales Of Xillia

CONCEPT ■ Only the eighth 'Mothership' title to make it to Western shelves, the *Tales* series returns as unlikely heroes unite to save a doomed world.

Treading familiar ground has never felt so exhilarating

It's harder than ever for a franchise to stay relevant. If you consider the games in the role-playing genre that have stood the test of time, you'd have no problem counting them up on one hand. It satisfies the narrative nerd in our hearts, then, that Namco Bandai are still hedging bets on localising the *Tales Of* series for the Western world.

The most popular JRPG series this side of *Final Fantasy*, the *Tales* series has happily carried itself across multiple generations, and as the eighth 'Mothership' (main series) title is prepped for Western launch, we can't help but get excited as the series' two major designers, Kosuke Fujishima and Mutsumi Inomata, collaborate on a universe for the very first time.

Framed around the world of Liese Maxia, a land where humans, monsters and spirits are able to reside together peacefully, our two main protagonists are drawn into the fray as spirits begin to mysteriously vanish in the city of Il Fan. Thrown together by strange occurrences, only to set out on an adventure of a lifetime… just because the *Tales* series has persisted for two decades doesn't mean it's quite ready to inject wilder story sensibilities into its formula just yet.

The story might be on a road well travelled, but a real innovation for the series comes from the addition of the second playable character and what this means for the battle system and narrative flow. There are two primary characters to choose between from the outset, governing who you'll follow through cut-scenes and conversation. The character work and world building is often praised for outshining its *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* brethren, so to see *Xillia* branching out with a more dynamic tale is certainly welcome news. Of course, if you're worried by the concept of multiple playthroughs, **games™** was assured that the core principles of characters living, journeying and experiencing events together is still a big priority for Namco Bandai; this is just a method of expanding perception.

> "The latest game in this prolific series gives gamers a brand new world and cast of characters to adventure with"
> OLIVIER COMTE NAMCO BANDAI

///The familiar LiMBS (Linear Motion Battle System) makes a welcome return, though with the emphasis placed on a secondary protagonist, Namco Bandai is taking an



INTRODUCING OUR UNLIKELY HEROES

FOR THE first time ever in a *Tales* game, two characters will be wrestling for the centre stage. Jude Mathis (designed by Kosuke Fujishima) is a 15-year-old medical student, who's deeply troubled by the backfiring of Spirit Artes causing so many injuries in his city of Il Fan. His investigation into the disturbances leads him into the path of Milla Maxwell (designed by Mutsumi Inomata). Milla is the first female character to take a lead position in *Tales*. A powerful user of the Artes, she's on a mission to put an end to the disappearing spirits – and find out who is responsible for siphoning mana life force from her peers. By crossing paths, the duo set out together on the journey of a lifetime.





INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PlayStation 3
Origin:
Japan
Publisher:
Namco Bandai
Developer:
Namco Bandai
Release:
2013 (Japan: out now)
Players:
1

Developer Profile

The *Tales* games were originally developed by Wolf Team until Namco became the majority shareholder over Telenet Japan in 2003, renaming the studio Namco Tales Studio. They worked hard on the core 'Mothership' titles, before the current *Tales* team was dissolved under the wider Namco Bandai banner late 2011.

Developer History

Tales Of Vesperia
2008 [360, PS3]

Tales Of Eternia
2005 [PSP]

Tales Of Symphonia
2003 [GC, PS2]

Tales Of Phantasia
1995 [SNES]

High Point

Tales Of Phantasia was a fantastic new RPG experience in 1995 that was simply trapped in Japan. It took a decade, but by the time it arrived on the Game Boy Advance we couldn't have dreamt of a better localisation.

opportunity to make some advancements with the system. Players are encouraged to take advantage of a Duel Raid feature, which lets two characters link Artes (magic) in battle to unleash devastating combos.

The fights are incredibly frantic. For players growing tired of the *Persona*-esque turn-based pacing that hangs over most JRPGs, the action orientated flow of *Xillia* will be a refreshing divergence. The fights focus on pairs, and when the screen begins to fill with friend and foe alike it's quite the spectacle, as characters flip, dive and slash their way around an area. Our only concern from going hands-on is that at times *Xillia* can feel like it's leaning far too heavily on button mashing than precise take-downs, though we are sure that as the link Artes combos become more intricate and the spiderweb upgrade system opens up, combat will be as tactical as you want to make it.

Tales Of Xillia has been out in Japan since 2011 – it even has a sequel – but that doesn't make us any less grateful for Namco taking a risk and bringing it to our shores. Graphically, it's now going up against another Namco property, *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch*, for the visual crown, but as *Tales* switches the camera from top-down to third person we can't help but wonder if this will be the most visually compelling and arresting game of the series to date.

By now, fans know what to expect from a *Tales* game. But with all of the innovation Namco Bandai is incorporating into the title's foundations, this could be the chance to bring in herds of new fans. From what we've seen, we were incredibly impressed. The localisation seems to be covered masterfully; everything is in place for *Xillia* to steal the JRPG show when it launches later in 2013.

■ Above: Milla Maxwell is the first female character to take the lead in a *Tales* game. She possesses power over all four spirits of earth, water, wind and fire, and has the most to lose from the mysterious forces siphoning away mana. Below: Combat is frantic, once again incorporating the LiMBS battle system.





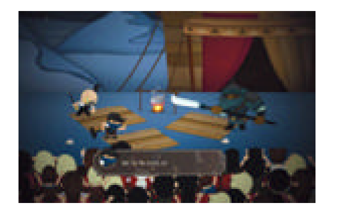
■ Above: *Tales Of Xillia* looks gorgeous, and with Namco Bandai moving the camera into a third-person perspective, the world has really come to life. Who you select as your main character may also determine what future roads you travel throughout the game.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

FOUL PLAY

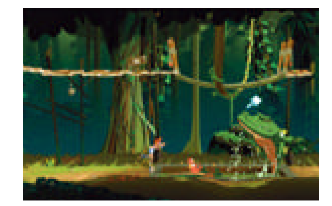
Format: XBLA
Publisher: Mediatonic
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2013



MEDIATONIC'S UPCOMING side-scrolling beat-'em-up *Foul Play* takes to the theatre to present the life and times of legendary daemonologist Baron Dashforth. The Baron may have retired from his Victorian-era exploits, but players will get the opportunity to relive his greatest adventures on the stage. Enemies are extras in costumes, the sets are larger than life; a brawler with a theatrical flourish.

HAROLD

Format: XBLA, PC
Publisher: Moon Spider Studio
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2013



FOR MOON Spider's debut release, the studio is looking to pitch into the re-emergence of the 2D platformer that we've seen evolve on the XBLA platform. Players will be able to guide and protect Harold, an out-of-shape runner, through vibrant but treacherous obstacle courses. Taking on the role of his guardian angel, they can manipulate the environment to assist Harold and impede other contestants.

MONSTERS ATE MY BIRTHDAY CAKE

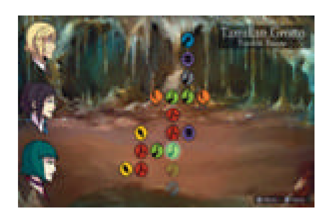
Format: iOS
Publisher: Sleep Ninja Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



MONSTERS ATE My Birthday Cake quickly found itself funded through Kickstarter, and for good reason. An environmental puzzle game heavily inspired by *Legend Of Zelda* certainly isn't anything new, but the *Tokidoki* and *Adventure Time* styled visuals add a wonderful flair to the game. It also promises an expansive world, dungeon hunting and plenty of levels to put your problem-solving powers to the test.

VACANT SKY: AWAKENING

Format: PSVita, iOS, Android
Publisher: Project BC
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



VACANT SKY was but a free-to-play RPG once upon a time, created in RPG Maker, but thanks to Kickstarter it has found a new lease on life. Updated graphics and a new engine is letting this exciting modern take on the classic RPG become fully realised. Told across seven years, it offers players the opportunity to see the world and their character grow as the end of the world draws near.

PROJECT X ZONE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Banpresto, Monolith Soft
ETA: 2013



OUR JAPANESE friends have been enjoying this one for months now, but it looks like *Project X Zone* is finally getting localised. One for fans of Sega, Capcom and Namco Bandai, *X Zone* is a mash-up that features over 200 characters across 29 different franchises. It's pretty crazy, a point hammered home once you even attempt to digest the fighting-meets-turn-based-strategy gameplay.

SUPER ROBOT WARS UX

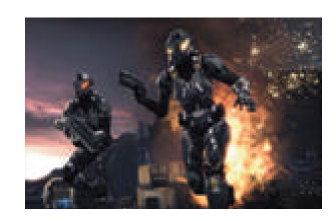
Format: 3DS
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Banpresto
ETA: 2013



THE *SUPER Robot Wars* franchise is finally making the transition to 3DS, a tactical RPG that features robots from 16 franchises battling for scraps. *Vocaloid* and Stan Lee's *Heroman* are among the eight new media franchises joining the fray. No word on whether this is receiving a localisation just yet, but as it's the first handheld instalment to feature voice-acting, the transition may take a while.

DUST 514

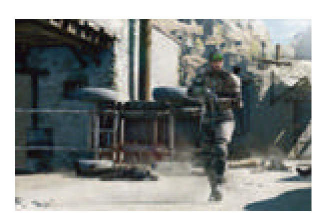
Format: PS3
Publisher: CCP Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



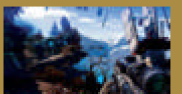
IT'S BEEN a big month for *EVE* spin-off *DUST 514*. Not only has it entered public beta – getting a step closer to its full free-to-play roll out – but it was also officially connected to Tranquility for the first time. Now, PS3 players can have direct influence and interaction with merchants of the stars from EVE. We will see if this grand cross-platform experiment will succeed.

SPLINTER CELL: BLACKLIST

Format: Multi
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: In-house
ETA: August 2013

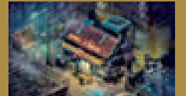


IT'S ALREADY been three years since our last outing with Sam Fisher, and we'd be lying if we said we weren't getting excited about donning the night-vision goggles all over again. Ubisoft is increasing the fluidity of play this time around, with the ability to pinpoint and execute enemies on the run, though no word on whether many of the stealth elements that lost their way with *Conviction* will return.



DELAYED – THE WONDERFUL 101 (Wii U)

Platinum Games has a busy 2013. With *Anarchy Reigns* and *Metal Gear Rising* just finding shelves, and *Bayonetta 2* off in the distance, something had to fall by the wayside. Expect *The Wonderful 101* to launch before June.

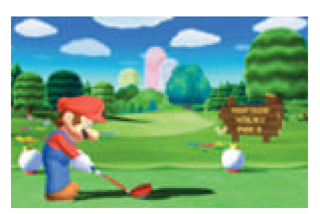


DELAYED – PIKMIN 3 (Wii U)

While originally pencilled in for the Wii U launch window, Nintendo have been steadily delaying the highly anticipated *Pikmin 3*, this time pushing it back to the ambiguous 'spring 2013'.

MARIO GOLF: WORLD TOUR

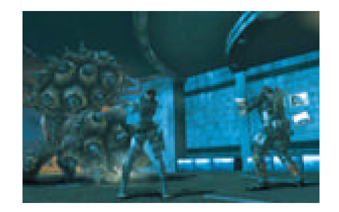
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Camelot Software Planning**
ETA: **2013**



CAMELOT HAS been teeing Mario up for over a decade, so it's no surprise to see the studio returning to the world of Mario Golf, this time on the 3DS. There's a variety of courses, ranging from traditional to those inspired by the craziness of the Mushroom Kingdom. Characters confirmed so far include Mario, Luigi, Waluigi and Donkey Kong – though expect a roster of characters to turn up for this summer's world tour.

RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS

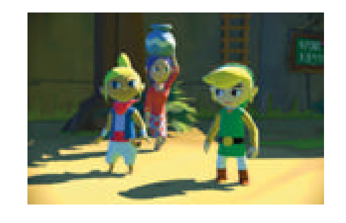
Format: **X360, PS3, Wii U, PC**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **May 2013**



RESIDENT EVIL: Revelations was a welcome addition to the Nintendo 3DS library, hanging somewhere between *Resi 4* and *5* with its blend of gameplay styles. Capcom have elected to port the game over to consoles, with updated graphics, lighting effects and character models. *Revelations* will also include new enemy types that change the pace of the game, and, for the sadists among us, an 'Infernal' difficulty mode.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER HD

Format: **WII U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Nintendo EAD**
ETA: **Q3 2013**



NINTENDO DIDN'T quite get round to announcing the Gamecube Virtual Console for Wii U like we hoped, but they did announce that they'd be bringing *The Wind Waker* to glorious HD some time before the end of the year. Not only are they updating the graphics, they are also fully integrating the Gamepad and Miiverse into play, while taking the opportunity to fine-tune certain aspects of the gameplay.

KAMEN RIDER: BATTLERIDE WAR

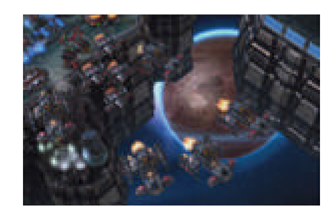
Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **May 2013**



NAMCO BANDAI is hard at work on a new title based on popular Japanese Tokusatsu *Kamen Rider*. A motorbike-riding superhero dressed as a grasshopper it is then. Coming exclusively to PS3, *Kamen Rider* will let you cause havoc for forces hell-bent on total control of the earth. We've been told to expect gameplay similar to that of *Dynasty Warriors*, only… on a bike.

STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM

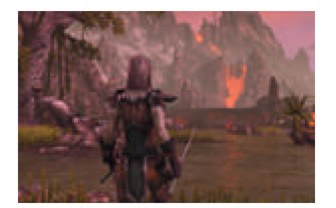
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Blizzard**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **March 2013**



BLIZZARD HAS a way of releasing expansions with such an expansive amount of content that they rival the size of most full blown-releases. The trend continues with *Heart Of The Swarm*, part two of the planned *StarCraft II* trilogy, boasting a Zerg-focused campaign with over 20 playable levels. Multiplayer is less abrasive for new players, while still adding seven new units to the fray.

ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

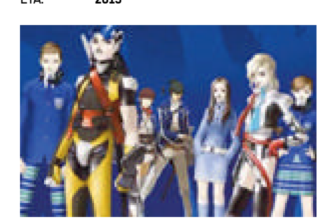
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Bethesda Softworks**
Developer: **ZeniMax Online**
ETA: **2013**



THERE'S ALWAYS the vocal minority making a lot of noise about nothing, so aside from the detractors beating *Elder Scrolls Online* unceremoniously with the *Warcraft* stick, things seem to be shaping up nicely. Set a millennium before the events of *Skyrim*, the story revolves around three factions warring over the throne of the Emperor of Tamriel. Beta sign-ups are now live, so be sure to register your interest.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI X FIRE EMBLEM

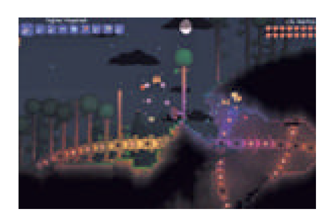
Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Atlus**
ETA: **2013**



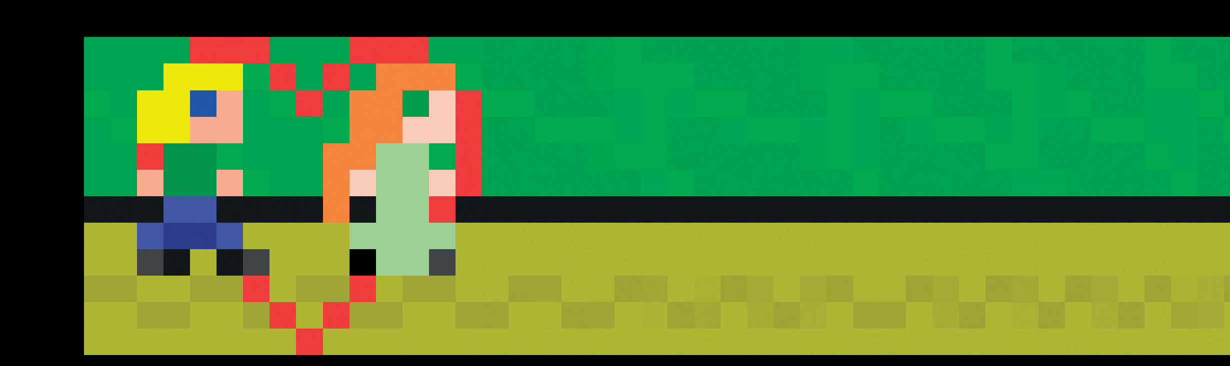
ATLUS ARE bringing the cast of *Shin Megami Tensei* to the Wii U, but they won't be alone. Teaming up with Nintendo, they will be merging with the world of *Fire Emblem* for one of the more unsuspecting mashups of 2013. It's certainly great to have this come together as an RPG, and not another throwaway card-battling brawler. Fingers crossed on a North American and European release.

TERRARIA

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Re-Logic**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **April 2013**



AFTER A healthy lifespan on the PC, *Terraria* is finally making the digital leap to X360 and PS3. The upgraded graphics look fantastic, and while this 2D crafting game draws a number of comparisons to *Minecraft*, it offers a deeper (not to mention wilder) experience than its cousin could ever hope to do. If you dig too far down, don't be surprised if you walk right up to the gates of hell.

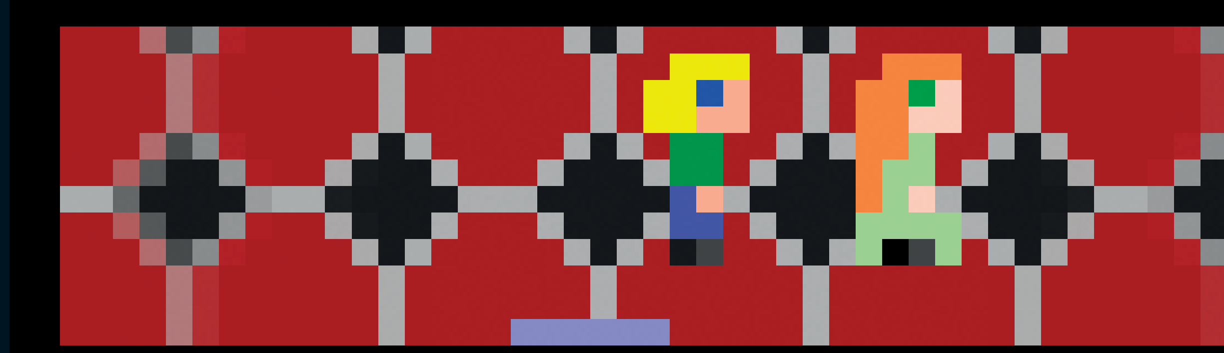




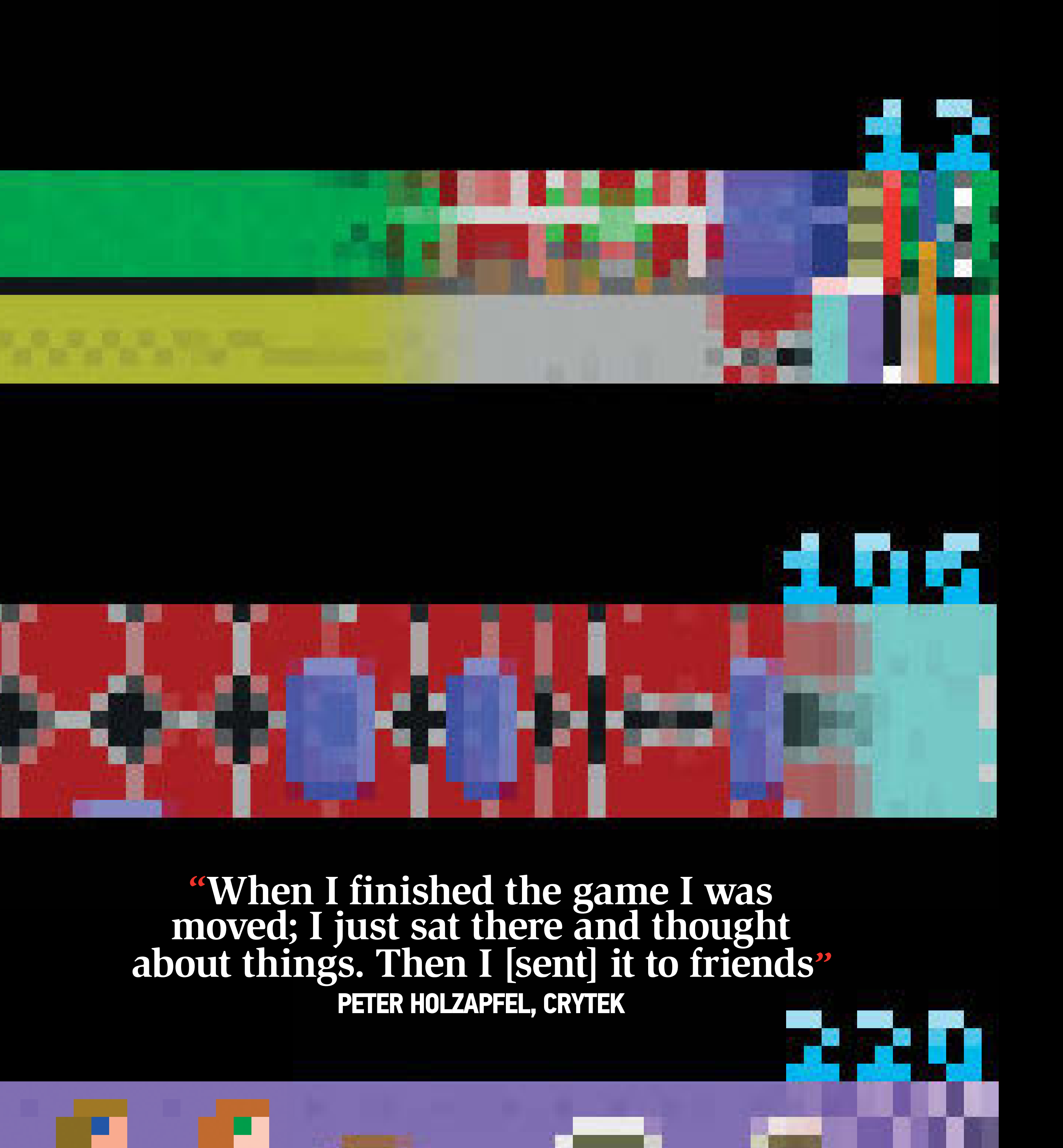
Passage

PETER HOLZAPFEL, CRYTEK

"There will always be that moment in Red Dead Redemption, *when you ride into Mexico and José González kicks in... making people pick one [game] is kind of cruel. Okay, here it is: Jason Rohrer's* Passage. *The game is hard to write about, because you get the most powerful experience out of it if you don't know anything. I will try not to spoil it. I love the simplicity of it, how it builds up, hits you and then changes your perception in such a short time frame. When I finished the game I was moved; I just sat there and thought about things. Then I [sent] it to friends. I love* Passage *because in its small way it shows what games can also be, in addition to all the other things I love about them."*

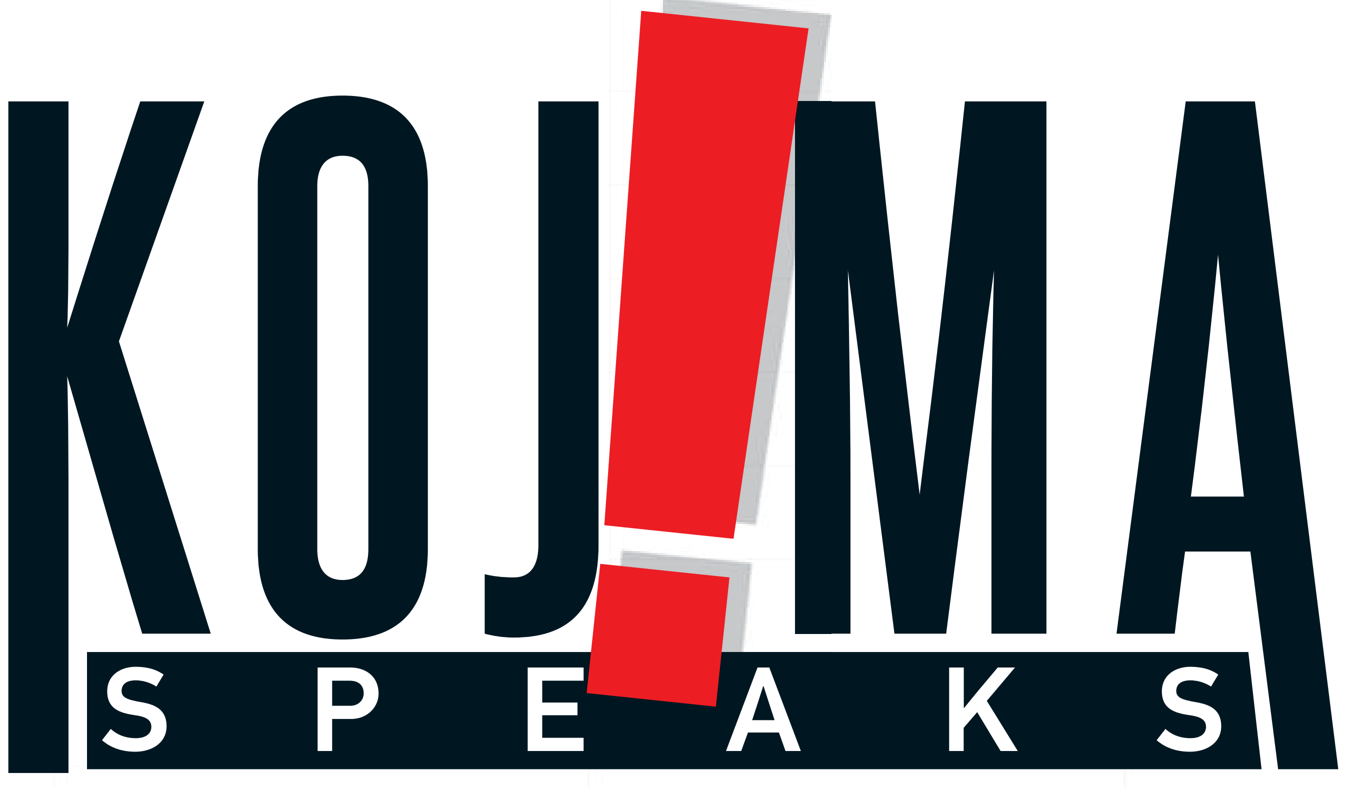






"When I finished the game I was moved; I just sat there and thought about things. Then I [sent] it to friends"

PETER HOLZAPFEL, CRYTEK



Photography by Greg Moss

When it comes to videogames, there are perhaps only a few franchises that have spawned an almost universal following and appreciation. As more and more games fall to into the pitfalls of reboots, reimaginings and oversaturation, it has never been so difficult for a character to establish a lasting legacy.

It was something we considered as we sat awaiting our interview with Hideo Kojima, the enigmatic creator of the *Metal Gear* franchise. Kojima is touring the world in promotion of the recently released *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* from Platinum Games. After 25 years of *Metal Gear*, the world is beginning to expand out of Konami and – more importantly – Kojima's hands and into the care of younger studios.

Snake has become an old man, the Patriots have disbanded and Raiden, defying all odds, has become an undeniable badass. There's only one thing time hasn't seemingly changed: Kojima's passion for creating entertainment.

Gaming's biggest rock star takes the seat opposite us to discuss the rocky production of *Rising* and his exciting vision for the future of the *Metal Gear* franchise.



"One thing from the beginning I was a little nervous about: Platinum is very good at making games, but they're not very good at honouring schedules," Kojima chuckled, giving us a rare insight into the man behind the codec. "They tend to take their time with games, so I was a little worried at the start. But I made it clear that in order to succeed on a worldwide scale you not only have to make a good product, but also honour the schedule.

"This time they came through and delivered the product. So, I think they learned something. Especially [Platinum Games' designer] Hideki Kamiya, he was surprised they actually did it."

Platinum Games has quite the reputation. Formed off the back of Capcom-funded Clover Studios – responsible for *Viewtiful Joe* and *Okami* – Platinum has recently made a name for themselves with action-centric titles such as *Bayonetta*, *Vanquish* and *Anarchy Reigns*. When it came to *Rising: Revengeance*, Kojima affirms that they were the only studio capable of handling such a project.

"Platinum Games emerged as the only choice I felt confident in. It was important that the developer excels at creating action games

and also understands the cultural aspects behind the katana as a weapon. Platinum was the only studio that fulfilled that criteria and could provide a concrete direction for the game."

It's interesting that Kojima should mention the need for concrete direction, as his internal Kojima Productions studio was unable to provide such a thing for this divisive title. Despite an official announcement at E3 2009, *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* – with Lightning Bolt Action replacing the tradition tagline of Tactical Espionage Action – was far from completion. With the team struggling to get the game in a playable state, Kojima was on the brink of cancelling the project entirely.

"The reason *Rising* came about was because the younger staff at Kojima Productions were going to make the next *Metal Gear* title. But tackling a numbered title in the main series was too much pressure for them, so they proposed a spin-off featuring Raiden as the main character.

"We actually worked on it very hard for two years in-house," Kojima revealed. "We had a cutting mechanic, a solid story, character designs, models and game backgrounds. However, the team was still struggling with the game design.

"We had great programmers and a great team, but they're very scientifically minded. When they approached this mechanic of having to cut things freely they did it in an extremely detailed way, almost like an industrial simulation. It was slow, methodical and very precise," considers Kojima, delving a little further into the game that could have been. "You could cut almost anything. You could cut enemies and pieces of the stage, and all those pieces would fall down realistically like a physics simulation. They'd remain in the stage; you could bump into them, kick them around and use them as part of the gameplay. It was very accurate, but also extremely intense and demanding on the system, not to mention that gameplay wise it was very hard to balance.

When we ran into problems, usually what would happen is I would have to jump in and take over and start over." This isn't uncommon; Kojima did the same back in 2001 for *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty* after he tried to step away from the franchise. "But I was already busy with *Ground Zeroes*, so I was actually trying to cancel the game at that point … In essence, if Platinum had said 'no', *Rising* wouldn't exist."

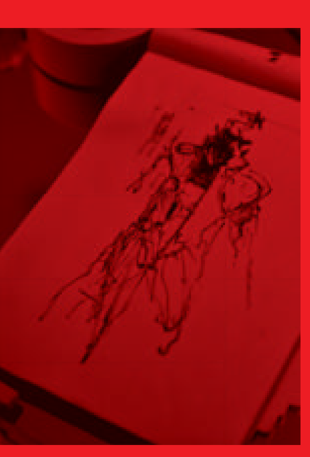
Of course, announcing the game at E3 meant the game had built a certain level of hype, something Kojima wasn't keen on answering to. "The problem was that we had already shown *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* at E3 and there were a lot of players really looking forward to the game. So I tried to think of a way to keep the project alive.

"Platinum Games was really the only studio that I could think of that could take over and do it properly," Kojima states, though the end product isn't exactly what Kojima Productions had envisioned. To make the game work, Platinum had to do away with some of the more intricate mechanics.

"When we handed it off to Platinum Games, they did away with some of that precision, but focused on making the cutting feel

"I WAS ACTUALLY TRYING TO CANCEL THE GAME AT THAT POINT . . . IF PLATINUM HAD SAID 'NO', RISING WOULDN'T EXIST"







Artist Yoji Shinkawa had no time to talk to us, as he was busy painting this canvas of British Snake.

!

OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE

THIS ISN'T the first time Hideo Kojima has outsourced development of a *Metal Gear Solid* title, though the last time didn't go quite as well as Platinum's exercise in slicing.

"You have to match the studio to the project. In the past we did *Twin Snakes* with Silicon Knights and it didn't do that well. I think part of the reason was that we were trying to control it too much," says Kojima, though that's not to say he is completely opposed to spinning out the *Solid* universe again. In fact, the developer has a clear idea for an expansion. "I think *Rising* is a special case, making a spin-off game just for him. In the future I may make other games featuring The Boss – that's what I want to do – but as far as a series of spin-offs… maybe there might be another *Rising* in the future, but it's not something I want to make a habit of."



satisfying. Really, the final version of Blade Time is thanks to Platinum and their sensibilities of bringing that balance to the equation. In the end, Platinum took over and did a great job. We have a great product as a result."

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance has had near universal critical and commercial success, and despite Kojima speaking so highly of the end result, that doesn't mean he doesn't still see room for the studio to improve. In fact, Kojima is concerned that the studio's technology isn't quite at the level it should be – a worrying prospect when you consider the next generation of consoles is just around the corner. Perhaps through a slip of the tongue he reveals Platinum are working on a new engine, though we can only guess as to what they could be working on for Sony and Microsoft's new consoles.

"Platinum's team is great at creating action games better than anyone else. I love them personally as individuals, and now they're able to do things on schedule as well. That's very important," he says with a playful grin. "The one thing that I think they could still improve on is their technological level. Their technology isn't quite up to par. For the next project, if we did something with them, maybe we'd have them use FOX Engine. Or maybe use their next-generation engine. I'm not sure, but that's the point that I'd improve. If they did manage to get their technology up to par, they would really be a world class studio."

It has already been three years since Hideo Kojima's last game, *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, so we were of course interested to see what the mastermind had originally envisioned for *Rising*. As it turns out, Kojima has a very clear-cut vision of what he would have liked to have done with the spin-off.

"I will say that the original *Rising* product was intended to tell the story in-between *Metal Gear Solid 2* and *4*. I think there are a lot of possibilities there and cool stories can be told … the problem with *Rising* is that you're playing as Raiden, a cyborg; he's superhuman, so the direction had to change. I didn't want to focus on the stealth experience; instead I wanted to focus on the power-fulfilment fantasy where you're this cyborg ninja and can do amazing things. It's sort of a stress relief as a player.

! THE FUTURE OF METAL GEAR SOLID

THE FUTURE OF the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise is currently up in the air. While Hideo Kojima has already revealed *Ground Zeroes*, we still can't help but wonder where *The Phantom Pain* comes into his plans. Kojima put a lot of emphasis on the numbered entries and their importance to the lasting *Metal Gear Solid* franchise during our interview. It seems strange, then, that his next project is *Ground Zeroes* and not *Metal Gear Solid 5*. Though that's not to say we aren't excited; in fact, it sounds like it might be his most important work yet.

"The *Metal Gear Solid* series has been evolving towards my vision of what I think the stealth genre should be, and *Ground Zeroes* is the next step in that evolution.

"Videogames as a medium really haven't matured very much in the past 25 years. It's always about killing aliens and zombies – not that I don't like those games, they're fun – but I think games have a long way to go before they can mature. Over the past 25 years I've tried to work with the *Metal Gear* series to introduce mature themes, but really it hasn't got there yet compared to movies or books. It still has a long way to go, and that's precisely what I want to try and tackle with my next project, *Ground Zeroes*.

"Honestly, I'm going to be targeting a lot of taboos – a lot of mature themes – that are really risky. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I'll be able to release the game, and even if I did release the game maybe it wouldn't sell because it's just too much.

"But as a creator I want to take that risk. As a producer it's my job to sell that game, but I'm approaching this project from the point of view of a creator. I'm prioritising creativity over sales.

"It's very possible that some day in the future, after *Ground Zeroes* is out, I may be called up by management, who say, 'Kojima, what are you doing? *Ground Zeroes* isn't selling, what have you done?' At that point I'll be able to say, 'Don't worry, *Rising* is selling well.'"

"The only problem with that is that I think it would have been difficult for Platinum to develop the game if they were to set it between *Metal Gear Solid 2* and *Metal Gear Solid 4*. That story exists only in my head. Platinum would probably have had to come and consult with me at each step of the way. It would have been difficult for them to proceed with the game.

"That's why we changed *Rising* to after *Metal Gear Solid 4*. That gave Platinum more freedom and they could move forward with Raiden's future without having to worry about how it fits into the middle of the series.

"That said, some of the ideas they proposed, I was originally opposed to them. For example, there's a scene where Raiden throws Metal Gear Ray up into the air and I thought, 'There's no way, this is ridiculous.' But when they put it in the game and I had a chance to play it, it actually felt very good within that context. My job became not necessarily about fighting with them – occasionally we did have disagreements – but I just had to move that line a little bit and make sure we took advantage of Platinum in the best way possible, and work on something together that takes advantage of both studios."

That's not to say Kojima is a particularly massive fan of Raiden as the star of his own spin-off; he would have liked to see another certain cyborg in the driving seat. "Personally, I thought that if they were going to do a title based on Raiden, they should just do Frank Jaeger: I prefer him. But the team preferred Raiden, so I allowed them to proceed with that," he says, taking the opportunity to contemplate the greatest game concept of 2013 so far. "Honestly, I think that if we're going to make a sequel to *Rising* it should feature Frank Jaeger as the main character, versus zombies. Nanomachine-powered zombies. That's what I'm proposing to the producer at Platinum, but I think they're ignoring me … I said I'll even write the story for it, but the [Platinum] story writer said it's okay," he laughs; despite his status as a writer known for convoluted concepts, it's great to see he isn't opposed to a little bit of down to earth crazy now and again.

As our hour with Hideo Kojima begins to wind up, the conversation shifts to the games industry. In recent months we've seen more and more development outsourced from Japanese to Western studios, and in many ways it represents a changing face of the games industry. Kojima, however, doesn't see the need for such moves, viewing the territory far more transparently than perhaps his peers at Capcom and Nintendo.

"I don't want my comment to be taken as being representative of all of Japan, but I think it's largely due to a cultural difference," he says on the discussion of disparity between the Eastern and Western markets. "In the days of pixel-based games, gameplay was abstracted and were easily accepted regardless of their origin. However, as games have become more technologically advanced, it has become possible to portray more cultural detail in games.

"Japanese culture is very different from Western culture in terms of aesthetics,



THE KOJIMA LEGACY…

1987 Metal Gear
1990 Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake
1998 Metal Gear Solid
1999 Metal Gear Solid: Integral
2000 Metal Gear: Ghost Babel
2001 Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty
2002 The Document of Metal Gear Solid 2
2002 Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance
2004 Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes
2004 Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
2004 Metal Gear Acid
2005 Metal Gear Acid 2
2005 Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence
2006 Metal Gear Solid: Digital Graphic Novel
2006 Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops
2007 Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops Plus
2007 Metal Gear Solid 2: Bande Desinee
2008 Metal Gear Solid Mobile
2008 Metal Gear Acid Mobile
2008 Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots
2008 Metal Gear Online: Gene Expansion
2008 Metal Gear Online: Meme Expansion
2009 Metal Gear Online: Scene Expansion
2009 Metal Gear Solid Touch
2010 Metal Gear Arcade
2010 Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker
2011 Metal Gear Solid HD Collection
2012 Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater 3D
2013 Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance
TBA Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes
TBA Metal Gear Solid 5



! RAIDEN'S REVENGEANCE EXPLAINED

"RAIDEN WAS in *Metal Gear Solid 2* because at the end of *Metal Gear Solid* Snake had become this legendary hero. It didn't make sense to have this legendary hero having these codec calls coming in telling him how to do basic actions. It didn't sit well with me.

"So I decided it would make more sense to have a new guy come in, a newbie in the form of Raiden. He could grow with the player and look at Snake from the third-person point of view as this great hero. That was the concept for *Metal Gear Solid 2* … perhaps we didn't do a good enough job in conveying that to the user, and people reacted negatively as a result.

"In *MGS4* we brought him back as a cool character. At that point users wanted to play as Raiden, so it came full circle. This time *Rising* has him as the main character. That's the true meaning of the title '*Revengeance*'; it is Raiden's vengeance one more time. He's coming back to take revenge on his unpopularity."

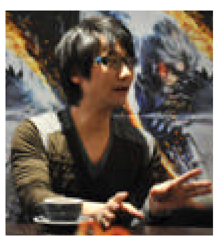
portrayal of emotions and storylines. Therefore many games created in Japan will not sell in the West, and many games created in the West will not do well in Japan. This has less to do with any deficiency in technology or game design, and more to do with a difference in taste and cultural points of reference.

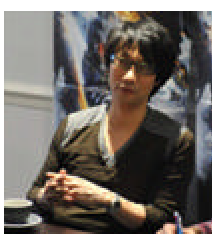
"That said, I want to make it clear that I never create games thinking of myself as a 'Japanese developer' and don't want to be quoted as such. I don't pay attention to East or West, I simply create the games that I want to create. Kojima Productions is a global studio that consists of creators from all over the world who share this one simple vision."

It's a fair point, and in this time of hyper-connected gaming worlds and cultures, it's hardly fair to think of regions in black and white terms. Though when it comes to the discussion of games as art, Kojima has a very decisive opinion; considering his cinematic style and intricate stories, we were honestly a little taken aback by his declaration.

"No. At least not in a traditional sense. Games need to be interactive and provide a service to the consumer. Therefore, the creator never has complete artistic control. For example, in modern art, an artist may create a sculpture of a car with a square steering wheel in order to make a statement. In the world of art, this is fine, since the viewer never needs to actually drive the car. However, that level of expression is limited in the medium of games, where the user must interact with the final product," he stated, adding, "Games may consist of many artist elements in terms of the visuals and the audio in the game; the final product is not art."

Hideo Kojima got his start in videogames 27 years ago with *Penguin Adventures* for Konami on the MSX. He has already seen through five generations of home console gaming, in that time creating one of the most popular franchises ever. As the major publishers get ready to unleash their new consoles upon the world, ushering yet another generation of systems, Kojima is confident he can still push the boundaries of gaming for a whole new era of player.





Hideo Kojima is approaching his 50th birthday, though he has more enthusiasm and dedication to his craft than many of his younger cohorts.

"The simple answer is 'yes'. I still think it's possible [to push boundaries]. A funny fact is that the Psycho Mantis battle is very famous now and respected for doing something outside of the box. Back in the day, when it was originally released, people thought it was a bug. People complained like hell about it and I got a lot of flak for that. It's not until about ten years later when people like you played the game that it came to an age when people could vocalise their respect for it, and it became respected," he offers, before speaking generally on what he hopes this next generation will bring.

"Up to this point, games have mainly evolved in terms of improvements to graphics and sound. It's been a form of vertical evolution based on the hardware's audio-visual capabilities. While this type of evolution will continue, I think more exciting developments will involve horizontal expansion. We're entering an era where gamers will be able to use multiple devices to access their games using cloud computing. Players will be able to interact with the game world using their consoles, smartphones, tablets or PCs. These will all serve as windows into a wider, always-online social experience. I think this is where the major changes will occur in the next few years, and we'll see new types of gameplay experiences emerge as a result."

Finishing off the interview, Kojima reveals that he had only had an opportunity to check out the PlayStation 4 announcement on his iPhone and hasn't seen much due to being on tour. While eager to hear our impressions of the launch, with a hearty laugh he does reveal to **games™** one big issue with Sony's announcement.

"Well, of course it's always exciting that new hardware is coming out," he concedes, before exclaiming, "The only problem is it kind of conflicts with *Rising*'s announcement!"

"I DON'T PAY ATTENTION TO EAST OR WEST, I SIMPLY CREATE THE GAMES I WANT TO CREATE"

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE 15 GREATEST VIDEOGAME MYTHS



Illustrations by Kevin Scully
www.kscully.co.uk

Like any industry that has not only existed for a significant portion of time but attracts continual commentary from passionate and devoted subscribers, the culture of videogames is not without its own tales of conspiracy, clandestine activity and desirable buried treasures. What originates as playground whispers sharing rumours of hidden codes and deleted scenes mushrooms into mainstream media attention, to the point where the blurry line between truth and invention becomes largely irrelevant.

Trying to get 'hot coffee' in GTA, avoiding Berzerk in arcades in case of immediate death and futilely trying to achieve a myriad of convoluted goals to discover a supposed hidden character in any number of games. Over the years we've lent an ear to the most implausible of myths and now's the time for gamesTM to bust them.

THE TAILS DOLL THAT CURSED A GENERATION

The Myth:

■ CLUNKY SEGA racer *Sonic R* feels like a malicious curse on gamers at the best of times, but rumours began to surface shortly after its Saturn release in 1997 that the hidden unlockable Tails Doll was actually bedevilled. Reports of horrific accidents started to emerge, children plagued with bad luck and manifestations of the creepy effigy causing chaos for the poor misguided souls willing to invest enough time into *Sonic R* to actually unlock the character. Dubious tales of grief grew more distressing, with reports of murders, grievous bodily harm and suicide linked to apparent possessions by the angular-anthropomorphic abomination.

The Truth:

■ CLEARLY A load of hokum proliferated around playgrounds in the late Nineties. In fact, the origin of the curse stems from bodged coding rather than any real-world supernatural malevolence. Levitating as the Tails Doll does so disquietingly around the track, players would often find the game freezing when playing as the (admittedly eerie) miniature fox. The myth caused *Sonic R* to attract far more attention than it deserved.

HOW TO FIX AN XBOX 360 WITH A DAMP TOWEL



■ WE'VE ALL experienced it. The dreaded three red rings of death – the mention of it still makes us shudder. But anyone lucky enough to own a bathroom towel could fix the problem!

The Truth:

■ OR SO the tale says. Wrapping your busted 360 in a towel and switching it on for an extended period of time was supposedly the fix – causing the components to overheat and remelt back into position. In reality, other plastic components inside the console are likely to become damaged, shutting out any chance of getting your machine looked at by Microsoft, or at the very least trying to sneak it into a retailer as a functioning trade-in.

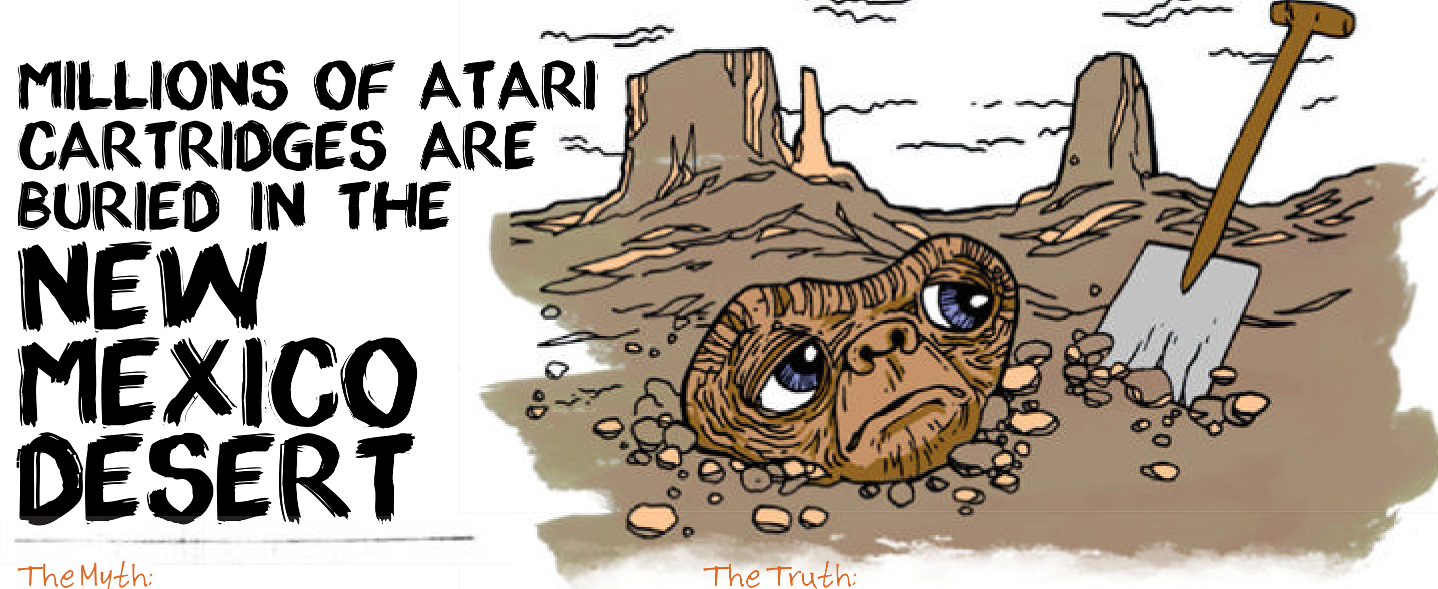
PONG INVENTED THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

The Myth:

■ VIDEOGAME HISTORY was made in Andy Capp's Tavern on 29 November 1972. Atari founders Ted Dabney and Nolan Bushnell would use this Californian bar as the testing ground for their new arcade game *Pong*. A day later Bushnell and Dabney received a call from the manager complaining that the unit was broken. Returning, the pair found it was indeed broken – the mechanism jammed with quarters due to its popularity. A quick-fix later and the games industry was born.

The Truth:

■ *PONG* CERTAINLY popularised videogames. However, Bushnell and Dabney installed another arcade cabinet in Andy Capp's Tavern a full year prior to *Pong*, titled *Computer Space*. Based on the game *Spacewar!* created by three MIT students, it was deemed too complex for novice gamers of the time (which was everyone). Despite *Pong*'s worldwide success and subsequent infamy, *Computer Space* is the first coin-operated videogame to be sold commercially.



MILLIONS OF ATARI CARTRIDGES ARE BURIED IN THE NEW MEXICO DESERT

The Myth:

■ ATARI WAS so confident about its home console release of *Pac-Man* and its videogame tie-in to the blockbuster Steven Spielberg film *E.T.* that when sales bombed, the firm was left with 5 million unwanted copies of each. While most companies opt to metaphorically bury their failures, Atari took the literal approach: in the summer of 1983, it sent 14 trucks loaded with millions of cartridges to the Alamogordo landfill in New Mexico.

The Truth:

■ INDEED, ATARI really did send a legion of dump trucks to the New Mexico desert and dropped some 10 million unwanted copies into a massive hole. However, the company had the landfill owners subsequently crush all the game cartridges with a steamroller and then cement the pile by pouring a layer of concrete on top of it. E.T. will struggle to get a reception under all that.



BROTHERLY LOVE IN THE MUSHROOM KINGDOM

The Myth:

■ AFTER THE wild success of *Super Mario 64*, players were desperate for more, meticulously scouring the Mushroom Castle for any hints towards expansion. The determined few with 120 stars could find Yoshi atop the castle lamenting the time between their last adventure – this, along with illegible scrawlings throughout the game, led people to believe other characters could be hidden away.

The Truth:

■ NO MATTER how hard you stare, the Ghost Fountain pedestal doesn't read 'L is Real 2401'. It's just placeholder text that Nintendo has gone on to use in other titles, such as *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time*. Creator Shigeru Miyamoto denied the rumour, though that wasn't enough for fans, prompting IGN to offer $100 to anyone who could prove Luigi existed legitimately within. The prize is still unclaimed to this day.



GOD OF WAR'S HIDDEN PHONE NUMBER

The Myth:

■ APPARENTLY DAVID Jaffe had some extra time at the end of the development cycle of *God Of War*, with talk of a hidden code granting you a phone audience with the man himself floating around for months.

The Truth:

■ THIS ONE did actually turn out to be true, in a sense. Persistent players could slug away at two plain-looking pillars to reveal two hidden codes. If deciphered properly, you were granted a 1-800 number from the gods. The number led to Kratos and Jaffe greeting you, though Kratos soon grows tired of the developer's chatter and eventually kills him.

DONKEY KONG WASN'T MADE BY NINTENDO

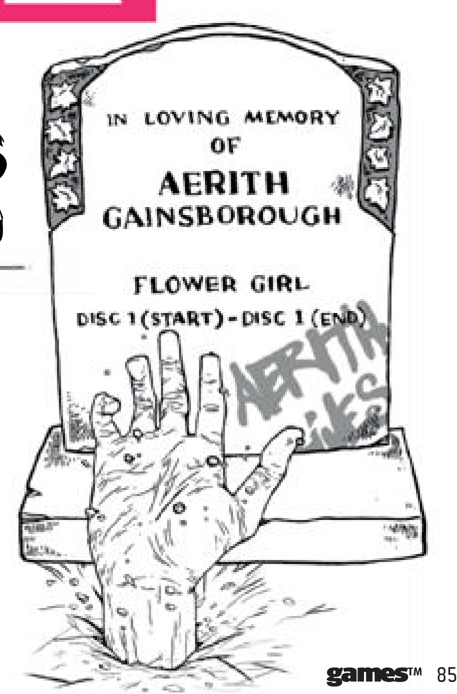
The Myth:

■ DURING THE early Eighties, Ikegami Tsushinki – a leading Japanese manufacturer of broadcast television equipment – developed a series of high-profile arcade games as a subcontractor to Japanese videogame companies. Keen to break into the emerging arcade marketplace but lacking the technical proficiency, Nintendo turned to Ikegami to create its seminal coin-op, *Donkey Kong*.

The Truth:

■ THE ROM for *Donkey Kong* is perhaps more revealing than most would expect, containing the following message: 'CONGRATULATION !IF YOU ANALYSE DIFFICULT THIS PROGRAM,WE WOULD TEACH YOU.***TEL.TOKYO-JAPAN 044(244)2151 EXTENTION 304 SYSTEM DESIGN IKEGAMI CO. LIM.' While *Donkey Kong* is based on the designs of a young and inexperienced Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo hired Ikegami to program the *Donkey Kong* code. However, while Ikegami Tsushinki was an anonymous collaborator, it owned the rights to the actual code and manufacturing (not the characters or brand) and after the initial quota of boards was fulfilled, Nintendo decided to shuck its commitment to Ikegami and produce its own *Donkey Kong* units. A legal battle ensued that would rage for almost a decade, with the courts ruling in Ikegami's favour and Nintendo making an out-of-court settlement.**

DETERMINATION CAN BRING FINAL FANTASY CHARACTERS BACK FROM THE DEAD



The Myth:

■ AERIS'S DEATH at the hands of Sephiroth is a trauma that any child of the Eighties can't soon forget, prompting heartbroken players to search through the streets of Midgar to find a way to revive her. After all, there just had to be a way to take her on that airship ride we promised.

The Truth:

■ DESPITE A herculean effort from the community, Aeris Gainsborough simply cannot be revived to fight another day. This myth comes from collective denial more than anything else, with gamers even going as far to claim that Aeris's ghost has been sighted wandering the church grounds. While she can't be revived, there is a way to stop her from dying. Just before Sephiroth lands his killing blow, hold down L1+R1+L2+R2+Select+Start – just make sure that you've saved your progress recently.

THE CODE THAT REMOVES LARA CROFT'S CLOTHES

The Myth:

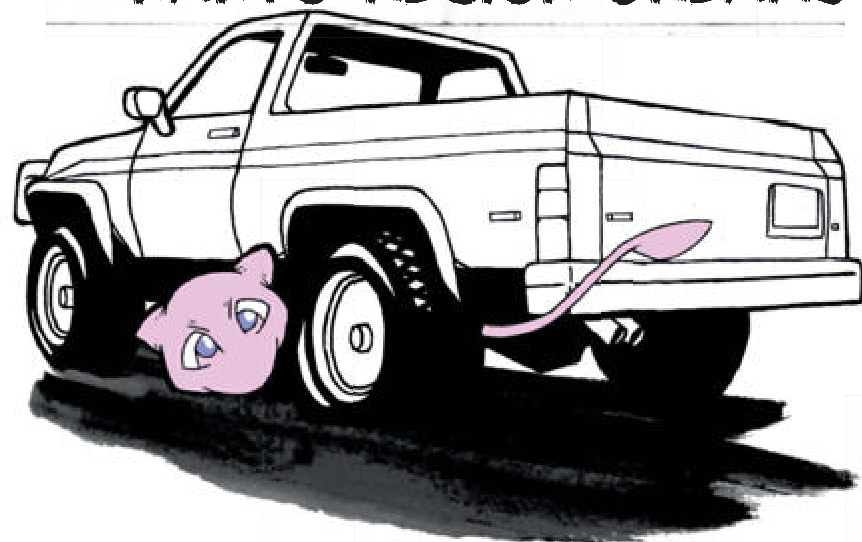
■ WHEN LARA burst onto the scene in 1997, she became an internationally recognised sex symbol thanks to her tomb-raiding antics. This led to gamers wanting more from their heroine, and it wasn't long before rumours began to circulate about a supposed 'nude raider' cheat code to strip Lara down to her birthday suit.

The Truth:

■ DESPITE DERANGED gamers desperately wanting to catch a glance of Lara's polygonal nasties, the inclusion of a code is simply not true. While PC gamers eventually found a way to include nude character models, developer Core Design went out of its way to dispel the rumoured code, issuing legal threats to any fansites that displayed her in the buff.



HIDDEN POKÉMON RUINS KANTO REGION DREAMS



The Myth:

■ THIS ONE haunted our childhoods. 'Gotta Catch 'Em All' is a phrase any Pokémon aficionado is familiar with, but when it came to the pocket monsters' first outing *Red/Blue*, filling the Pokédex with its 150 indexed Pokémon was the only life goal worth having. Everything changed when number 151, Mew, was revealed. A hidden monster added in at the tail end of development, only obtainable through a glitch that involved using Strength to move an immovable truck, revealing the legendary Poké Ball.

The Truth:

■ IF WE could count the number of hours we wasted in Vermilion City, using Surf off the SS Anne dock to reveal that truck, we'd probably be too ashamed to pick up a handheld again. But alas, no matter how full your Pokédex, no matter how many of your Pokémon learnt HM Strength, that truck never budges. Of course, if you had an Action Replay or the resolve to go to a Nintendo event, it was a different story entirely – though that's just cheating.

CLAIM THE HIDDEN TRIFORCE IN OCARINA OF TIME

The Myth:

■ AFTER EARLY beta footage showed Link plucking the Triforce out of a chest, fans of the long-running *Zelda* series were shocked to find the symbol of power, wisdom and courage out of their reach as a collectable item. It also didn't help matters when it became apparent that a Triforce-shaped hole was to be forever unfilled in the inventory.

The Truth:

■ SHORTLY AFTER *Ocarina*'s release, a bunch of inane methods for finding the Triforce throughout Hyrule began to surface; funnily enough, this was also around the same time the internet began to make its way into homes. The term 'internet troll' hadn't been coined just yet, but this might be some of their earliest work.



THE US GOVERNMENT CREATES AN ARCADE GAME THAT MAKES CHILDREN ILL

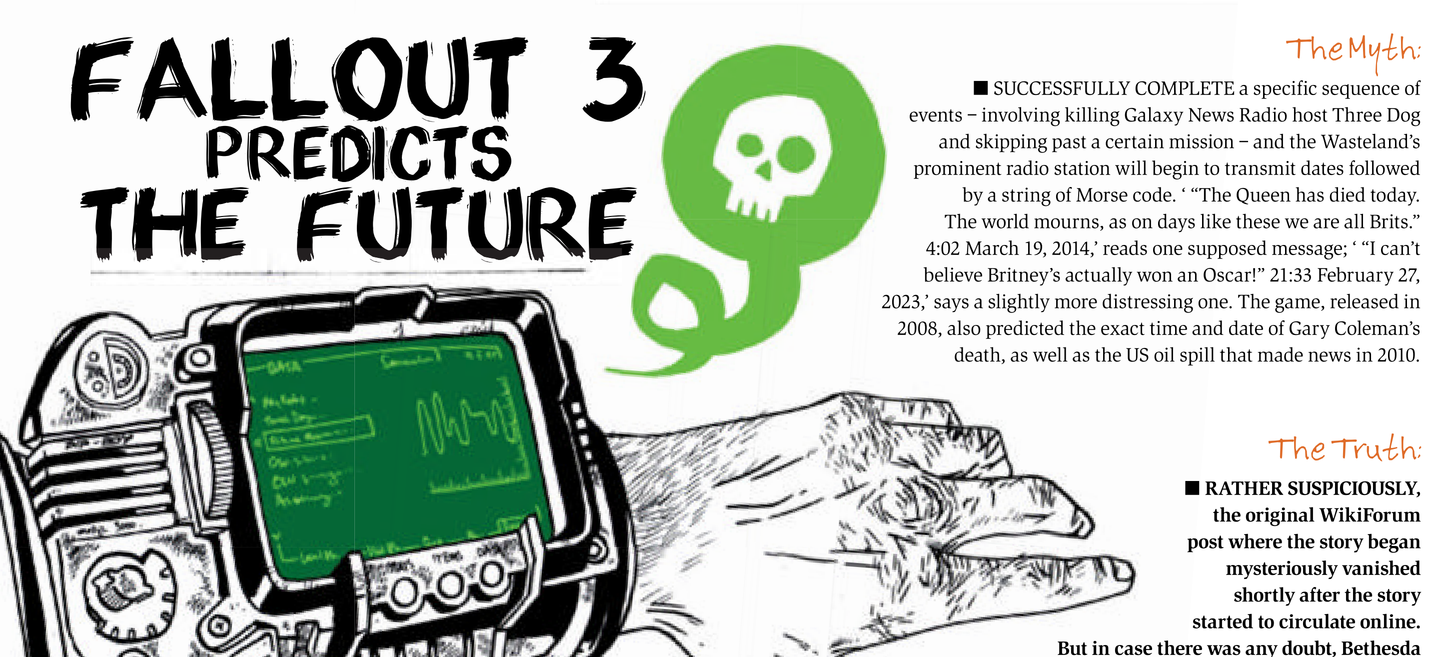
The Myth:

■ IN 1981 a new arcade cabinet appeared in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon. *Polybius* was an instant hit: eyewitness accounts claim addicted children would spend hours glued to the kaleidoscopic *Tempest*-style puzzle/shooter. However, as quickly as the machine appeared in arcades, reports of children suffering nausea, severe nightmares, amnesia and even committing suicide began to emerge. The myth maintains that shadowy onlookers dressed in black would constantly monitor *Polybius* players, before the cabinet vanished completely four months after it first arrived.

The Truth:

■ IN 2006, Steven Roach posted in a number of online forums claiming to be one of the four developers who worked on *Polybius*, stating that the game was tested locally in the Portland area before being removed due to reports that it caused severe nausea in players. He also declared that Atari designer Ed Rotberg worked on the game – something that Rotberg would vehemently deny later. However, the more widely believed truth is that *Polybius* wasn't actually a *Tempest*-style puzzle/shooter, but was in fact an early version of the game itself – one that caused children suffering from photosensitive epilepsy to undergo motion sickness and vertigo. The hoax was then spun through various Usenet groups and years of Photoshopped arcade cabinets and title screens would cement *Polybius*'s urban legend status.

FALLOUT 3 PREDICTS THE FUTURE



The Myth:

■ SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETE a specific sequence of events – involving killing Galaxy News Radio host Three Dog and skipping past a certain mission – and the Wasteland's prominent radio station will begin to transmit dates followed by a string of Morse code. ' "The Queen has died today. The world mourns, as on days like these we are all Brits." 4:02 March 19, 2014,' reads one supposed message; ' "I can't believe Britney's actually won an Oscar!" 21:33 February 27, 2023,' says a slightly more distressing one. The game, released in 2008, also predicted the exact time and date of Gary Coleman's death, as well as the US oil spill that made news in 2010.

The Truth:

■ RATHER SUSPICIOUSLY, the original WikiForum post where the story began mysteriously vanished shortly after the story started to circulate online. But in case there was any doubt, Bethesda confirmed that there was "no truth in it" to GamesRadar in 2010.

THE SPORTS GAME THAT DESTROYS REAL-LIFE CAREERS



The Myth:

■ THE MADDEN Curse dates back to 1999; while EA, the NFL and even John Madden himself refuse to acknowledge its existence, is the proof on the paper? The Madden Curse is a superstition that claims anyone to feature on the cover of an EA Sports *Madden NFL* game will be subsequently injured, have a run of bad form or see their career end entirely. Of the 16 players ballsy enough to grace the cover thus far, all 16 have had a run-in with the curse. 14 ended their respective seasons with injuries, while the other two became embroiled in the biggest upsets in NFL history.

The Truth:

■ IF YOU'D asked us last year, we'd have been inclined to say yes, but Calvin Johnson, the cover star for *Madden NFL 13*, has had a fantastic season. Despite fans coming out in droves online to try to stop the popular Detroit Lions wide receiver from taking his place on the game's cover, he rounded his season off by setting the all-time record in receiving yards – as well as setting a slew of other records. Looks like Johnson put that one to bed.

SADDAM HUSSEIN TURNS PLAYSTATION 2S INTO WMDS



The Myth:

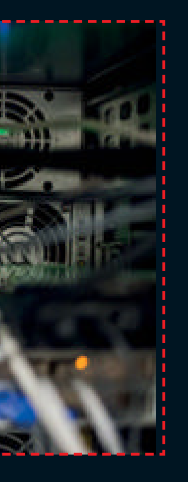
■ IN 2000 the US media began reporting that Iraq was importing large quantities of Sony's latest console, the PlayStation 2, into the country, which led to a large-scale investigation by the FBI. "Applications for this system are potentially frightening," said an intelligence source to US publication WorldNetDaily in December 2000. "One expert I spoke with estimated that an integrated bundle of 12-15 PlayStations could provide enough computer power to control an Iraqi unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV — a pilotless aircraft." Terrorists could potentially bundle several consoles to create a rudimentary missile-guidance system for nuclear weapons. You may wonder why Saddam Hussein would bother hosting the world's most insidious LAN party, rather than use a more technologically advanced PC? At the time the United Nations prohibited virtually all types of computer hardware and technology passing through customs, while videogame systems fell under the classification of 'toy' and not 'WMD'.

The Truth:

■ A NUMBER of the technological claims in the original WorldNetDaily article were wildly exaggerated and Hans Blix failed to mention the discovery of any PlayStation 2s during the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, there's a modicum of truth to the story: the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign built a supercomputer based on 70 PlayStation 2 consoles tethered together, creating a cluster capable of 500 GFLOPs, which qualifies as a supercomputer. Judgment Day is coming.



When The Lights Go Off
Disconnected
Unexpectedly disconnected from online services. Please check your Internet connection. Any progress or player experience from your current session will not be saved.
OK



The death of a server has gone from being a niche irritation to a mainstream concern. Why do games have the plug pulled on them? And what can we do to keep on playing even after they're dead? games™ went a-looking

There is one undeniable negative to the rise in popularity of online gaming: one day, the servers will be turned off. More often than not, this signals the death of a game; a shared experience lost and a battleground simply taken away. Usually this happens to games that simply aren't played much any more – something like *Halo 2* on PC, which was averaging around 20 players a day at the time of its shutdown announcement. There are also the annual sports game releases which inevitably lose the majority of their player base when the next in the endless series comes out.

It's difficult to argue with situations like these. Nobody can expect a publisher or developer to foot the bill to keep expensive master servers running for a fraction of a percentage of the available player base across the world to take advantage of. That would be lunacy. Even though it refused to participate in this feature, it's hard to take EA's statement about turning servers off as anything but genuine – heartfelt, even – as it tells the reader "The decisions to retire older EA games are never easy. The development teams and operational staff pour their hearts into these games almost as much as the customers playing them and it is hard to see one retired." It's not a positive step, but it is an understandable, necessary one.

But ominous signs have been making themselves known in recent years – the future we're heading for isn't one filled with servers amicably switched off for very genuine reasons. It's one of sudden closures of still-popular services with little to no reason given. It's one of online passes still available to purchase the day before a game's online mode is killed. And, most worryingly, it's one of single-player experiences being entirely closed off when DRM servers are put out to pasture.

But there's hope. True, you're unlikely to be able to still play *FIFA 09* online ever again, but there are fan-led services popping up – some established for a number of years – to help keep alive the games that have been left to rot on the vine by those that originally bankrolled them. Services like Online Consoles, which still sees regular action on *Phantasy Star Online* for Dreamcast, *Tribes Aerial Assault* on PS2 and *Quake III: Arena* on PC.

Ben Pekarek of Online Consoles explains, "I host match-making servers (aka master lists) for these games, all operating entirely independent of any outside publisher/developer influence. We do have to put in the extra effort to get matches going. Though there is a thrill to be gained from meeting up with another player in some dark corner of the net to sharing a few hours of frags and chatter. It becomes a much more personal experience. I guess this is why we stick with it despite the extra hurdles needed to make it all happen."

None of this is an anarchist's response to the perceived nefariousness of the all-seeing eye of the publishers in charge, as Pekarek points out: "Is the company 'evil' for pulling the plug? No of course not. They are simply driven by different motives. The company views the sense of community [between online gamers] as a perishable tool to drive sales. Gamers however view the community as their home, and therein lies the problem." No, it's merely a noble aim: to preserve something worth preserving, that players *want* preserving.

Pekarek goes on: "While it is unrealistic to expect every online game service to one day be capable of operating independently, I feel some servers and services should be emulated or made available to the public so we can look back to see what it was like to 'be there'. Online gaming is a part of our internet history, and documenting this experience is critical towards understanding how we used this medium to socially interact."

And in order to accomplish this act of benevolent preservation, Online Consoles has to operate without the help of those that initially created the

"I do wish official servers were left online for longer, if only to allow curious and dedicated minds within the community to code alternative server solutions."
Olaf van der Spek, XWIS

code. “I do not have much contact with publishers,” Pekarek explains. “I have communicated with a few higher-ups at various companies, but for the most part I have stayed away from negotiating to obtain their software.

“Few companies are willing to distribute server software to the public. The rule of thumb is: retain your software assets/technology, as unforeseeable opportunities for profit may arise. Companies would rather their code sit and collect dust in a drawer for 20 years than give it away for free. A great example is *Virtual On Oratorio Tangram*, which was once online in Japan for the Dreamcast, and later released as an online competitive capable download for XBLA.”

Then there are services like XWIS – another enthusiast-run bunch of servers for ‘switched off’ games, but one that was specifically asked by a publisher to carry on the hosting duties. Olaf van der Spek of XWIS tells us, “The community asked EA if XWIS could become the official server as XWIS provided better features, better reliability and better handling of cheaters than EA. Our community loved and still loves playing *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun*, *Red Alert 2*, *Renegade* and other games online, so we’d like for them to stay alive.”

It’s clearly not just those running the service that want the games to stay alive either, as van der Spek points out: “We’ve still got hundreds of players online at any time and tens of thousands of matches being played every month.” Not bad for a bunch of apparently defunct titles. It’s not *Call Of Duty* numbers, though, so it’s never going to appeal to the money men – and as irritating as it may be, that does make sense.

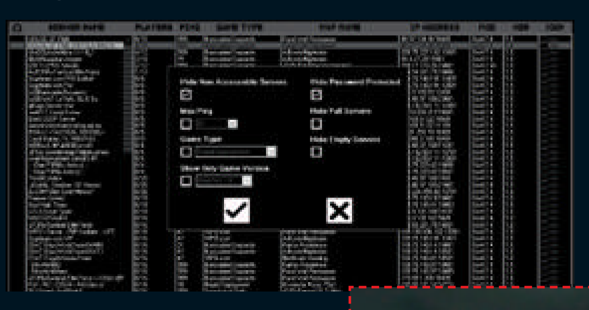
But the speed at which some servers are being shut off – EA’s decision to axe its *MMA* online service some 18 months after the game’s launch (without any sequel making an appearance) being a particularly striking example – is giving gamers pause for thought. Van der Spek knows where he stands on the issue: “I do think that online support should be provided for at least five years.” It might not be feasible, but from the viewpoint of the consumer it’s hard to argue with *at least* five years. Pekarek doesn’t offer a time frame, but is in agreement things should stay alive that bit longer: “I do wish official servers were left online for longer, if only to allow curious and dedicated minds within the community to code alternative server solutions.”

So does that mean van der Spek wishes publishers would keep their servers running under their own control, to make it easier on sites like XWIS? “Not really, we [do] a better job at that!” he responds. Pekarek hits us with a noncommittal “yes and no” when asked the same question – it’s not as straightforward as it might initially seem.

Then, of course, there’s the popular with publishers, hated by most others addition of always-on DRM to a number of single-player games that is already causing problems. The embarrassing climbdown by Ubisoft over its implementation of the system should have served as a warning to others that this probably isn’t the way to go, but it hasn’t stopped the likes of EA from demanding users be connected to its servers at all times when playing *SimCity*. So how long will these servers remain active? Will we be seeing a situation like with *Civilization II* where, over a decade after its original release, someone reveals they’ve been playing the game for all of that time? Or will it just get five years down the line before everything is cut off and nobody is

Unfair shutdowns

IT ISN’T always legitimate or understandable why a master server is shut down – sometimes it’s hardly explained or expected to be forgotten about or ignored, as if the player base will just accept their game is gone and move on. Take, for example, *SWAT 4* – it was still ranked as the 35th most popular game on Xfire, but new ownership of the GameSpy-run servers meant the number of people still taking down the bad guys together was irrelevant: it was shut off without warning. *Asheron’s Call 2* saw similar treatment, though not as brazen: a paid expansion was released just a couple of months before the game – which had been struggling – was given the axe. Fortunately, these are not the most common examples of server switch-offs.



When Microsoft shut down its Live service for the original Xbox, avid *Halo 2* fans kept the server alive by playing a marathon multiplayer session that lasted days.

> ”Is the company ‘evil’ for pulling the plug? No of course not. They are simply driven by different motives.“
> **Ben Pekarek, Online Consoles**

When The Lights Go Off

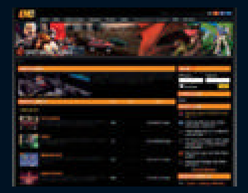


■ EA has come under severe consumer criticism since the closure of *MMA* and *FIFA* servers, especially as the former's online services were ended some 18 months after the game launched.

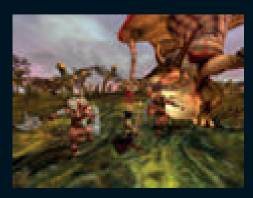
allowed to enjoy the experience they paid for?

It may seem a little extreme, and we know for a fact that publishers are aware of these issues and will very likely have plans in place to counter these potential issues (dropping the always-on requirement after a certain amount of time, for example). But it's a point worth considering – and a consideration that didn't even exist just a few years ago. And it's yet another warning klaxon blaring for this Brave New World of the current state of gaming.

So it's why we have to look to the likes of XWIS and Online Consoles to keep that dream alive. Maybe they'll be able to cope with the future's technical hitches, though Pekarek isn't exactly overflowing with positivity. "It all depends on the hardware platform and the capabilities of the games," he says. "Centralised services like XBLA/PSN and DRM-based PC platforms are going to be a real challenge with regards to long-term online play. The problem becomes even more complex when you take into consideration patches and DLC, where this content is installed while logged in and cannot be backed up. *Unreal Tournament* for the PS3 has LAN support. However, downloading and installing the critical update patch requires that you be logged into a PSN account."



■ The instigation of fan-run servers enables a small subset of gamers to enjoy games long after the majority of players have left the servers and publishers no longer support the online contingent.



■ Popular superhero MMO *City Of Heroes* closed its servers. Remaining freedom fighters gathered together to stage a vigil in the game's dying moments.

And, of course, there's the spectre of digital rights management: "DRM is the ultimate hurdle," continues Pekarek. "How can you own the online experience if the game itself isn't even owned by the consumer? DRM digital purchases are the modern equivalent of an extended rental without any means of backing up the games or cutting the tether to always-on-DRM."

And van der Spek is even less enthusiastic about a future where the online playing space can be saved – even by tenacious, hardworking enthusiasts: "Creating an alternative online service is just a lot of work."

With the number of hurdles being put in the way, it may well prove to be a bit too much hard work in future. Without the direct support of publishers coming together with more services like XWIS, we're likely to see a straightforward, linear path of games that can and cannot be played online – not to mention those single-player experiences that will be utterly broken when the master servers are turned off.

We went into this piece looking to get some sort of hope for the future; to get clarification from those creating these online-reliant environments that we, the paying customers, would still be provided for in some way years down the line. The fact that none of the publishers or developers attached to them was willing to speak to us isn't an admission of guilt, and should not be read as such. But it doesn't paint a hopeful picture.

So it's good to hear something optimistic from Pekarek: "Gamers can be pre-emptive in their efforts to secure the ability to play games online. Try contacting your favourite PC/indie dev who is working on an online game and say, 'Hey, do you think you can implement Direct IP Connection support?' With crowdfunding being such an influential part of videogame development these days, this might be a great way to help increase the number of online-capable games long-term."

How to bring online back from the dead

■ To get into the nitty-gritty, Pekarek tells us just how people can keep their favourite online games running even after servers are shut down. It doesn't work all of the time, but there are options: "There are three ways in which users can still play games online after the developer/publisher has ceased supporting the game (provided the game is free of DRM): 1) tunnelling a game that has LAN support using third-party software or VPN. 2) playing on emulated technology developed by the community. 3) TCP/IP Direct Connect: allowing you to directly connect to another player via their IP address." As if to provide the perfect example, he adds: "I still play *Total Annihilation* online for the PC, 16 years after it was originally released, due to its Direct IP support."

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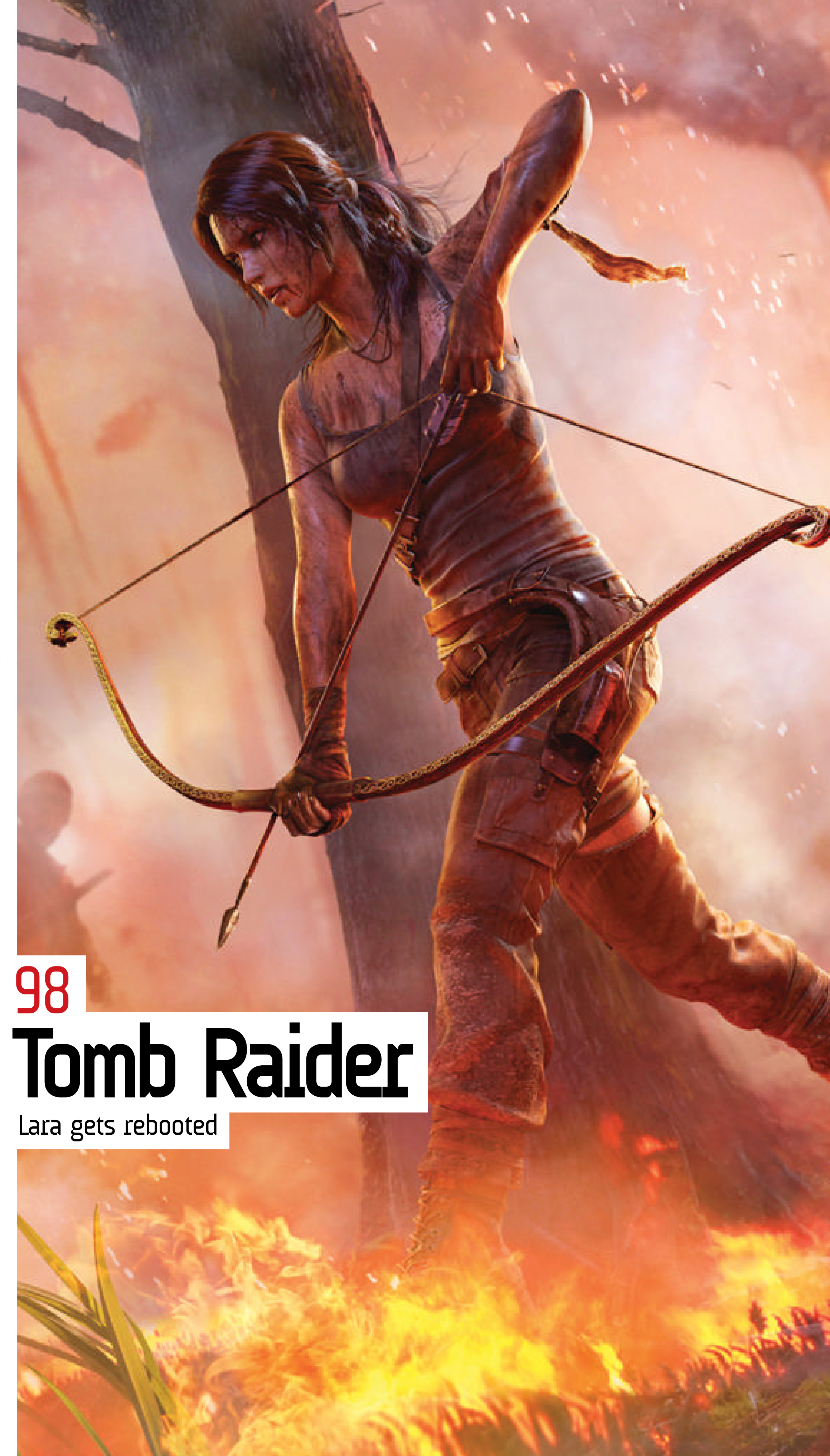




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Reviews



98

Tomb Raider

Lara gets rebooted



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

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TOMB RAIDER IS AN IMPOSSIBLY VIOLENT GAME. LARA CRAWLS AWAY FROM MORE FATAL FALLS THAN YOU'VE HAD HOT DINNERS

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

Lara only uses four weapons throughout her stay on the island – five, if you count the pickaxe – but that's more than enough. A robust upgrading system sees them improve as you invest salvage in them, whether that's increased rates of fire, specialised ammo, reduced recoil or whatever. This eventually earns you a complete overhaul. The WWII assault rifle, for example, is first replaced with an AK47-alike and finally a tooled-up 'Commando Rifle'. Each of the weapons serves a useful pathfinding function too, whether it's laying down ziplines, opening doors or clearing obstacles in Lara's path. The pistol's kind of useless, though. All it does is shoot bullets. Poor old pistol.







LARA'S ORIGIN STORY IS HER MOST BRUTAL TO DATE – AND ONE OF HER BEST

Tomb Raider

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Left: Lara gets impressively bruised and battered as she moves through the island; there are three different character models to show the change. Each is beautifully created and animated, giving the player a great anchor for their experiences.

Here are two things you need to know about the *Tomb Raider* reboot: the game's focal point is young Lara Croft's first kill – a breathless, gory brawl which ends with her shooting her attacker in the face, rolling free, and retching and howling at the enormity of what she's done; the game also features the phrase "Execute enemies at point-blank range for more rewards" as part of the description of a high-level skill, which lets Lara finish off wounded enemies by shooting them in the face to earn extra XP.

It's a testament to the strength of Crystal Dynamics' story and characterisation that the concept of a finishing move like that sticks out so much; in any other game of this ilk it wouldn't cause a ripple. The developer has taken the famously shallow character of Lara Croft and given her an origin story to be proud of, and although the progression from victim to survivor isn't perfect, it's a joy to play through.

That joy is largely due to the game's mechanics, which do their part to tell the story of Lara's rise to power after being shipwrecked and repeatedly abducted on an island in the windswept Dragon's Triangle – a network of islands off the Japanese coast. Much of the exploration and puzzle focus of the previous titles has been pushed to one side in favour of a more combat-orientated experience; and taking control of Lara as she grows, as her old life is shorn away, has a visceral quality that's often lacking in games with skill progression trees.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

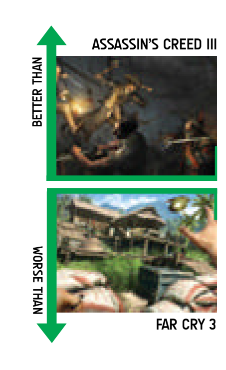
THE HUMAN FACTOR. *Tomb Raider* builds on the previous 22 games in Lara's catalogue, backing them up with an incredible story and some top-notch characterisation to make something brilliant.

Her default combat stance is a crouch – and if there's cover nearby, she'll automatically duck behind it without being told to. When idle, she holds herself ready and her eyes scan the environment for threats. She swings her climbing axe with wild, unbalanced strokes (when she finally learns how after several hours without a melee attack) and scrambles out of enemy lines of fire on all fours.



Above: The bow has the longest range of Lara's weapons, functioning much like a sniper rifle. Laying in wait and drawing back a powerful shot before lodging an arrow in some chump's head is very satisfying.





Left: Exploring the religion and history of the island forms a major part of the fun in *Tomb Raider*. Information can be found in documents and relics from a wide variety of eras, conveniently scattered throughout the play areas.

Combat is impressively tense thanks to a limited selection of weapons that always feel as though they're underperforming in relation to your needs: your shotgun spread not quite wide enough, your bow not quite fast enough on the draw, your assault rifle running dry when you need it to last. Fighting in *Tomb Raider* manages to maintain the sensation that you're seconds away from death at all times, which deserves respect even if, in hindsight, deaths in action – outside of a few tiresome instant-death QTEs – are very rare.

Even aside from the combat sequences, *Tomb Raider* is an *impossibly* violent game. Lara crawls away from more fatal falls than you've had hot dinners. If this game had realistic damage modelling, Lara would be dead in a cave around three minutes after you pushed Start.

If you fail a QTE, Lara is generally impaled on something; commonly it's a convenient pipe at head height, but an especially sharp tree branch will do in a pinch. All of this violence can get to be exhausting, especially considering that there are very few scenes where Lara is not fighting for her life in one way or another.

But throughout all this the modelling, scriptwriting and acting behind Lara is superlative; it's hard to think of a character more engaging on looks and actions alone. Her behaviour is skewed towards *not fighting*, whereas violence is a necessity for survival. In the opening stages of the game it's a wonderful concept, with the market so flooded with steely-eyed protagonists.

Of course, all that desperation washes away as you progress. Lara upgrades her weapons by collecting salvage. She toughens herself and learns to brawl in close combat and scavenge off the land. She packs incendiary ammo and a grenade launcher, and men run away screaming at her approach. At one point she emerges from a literal river of blood and proceeds to murder everyone in the room who isn't expressly her friend.

Which is why it's a shame that her wary, human behaviour doesn't change when she shifts between her states. For all the explosives and bullet wounds she carries, she still cowers into a crouch when enemies approach, and still handles the pickaxe like it's too much for her, even as it carves through the skulls of her enemies. If Crystal Dynamics had got her to stand up straight for the second half of the game, the transformation would be complete; but there's something about the end of the game where it tries to marry the two halves of Lara together that doesn't quite wash.

FAQs

Q. IS THERE MULTIPLAYER?

Yes, but thanks to network problems we couldn't play the final version before publication. Boasts team deathmatch and capture the flag.

Q. HOW LONG IS THE SINGLE-PLAYER?

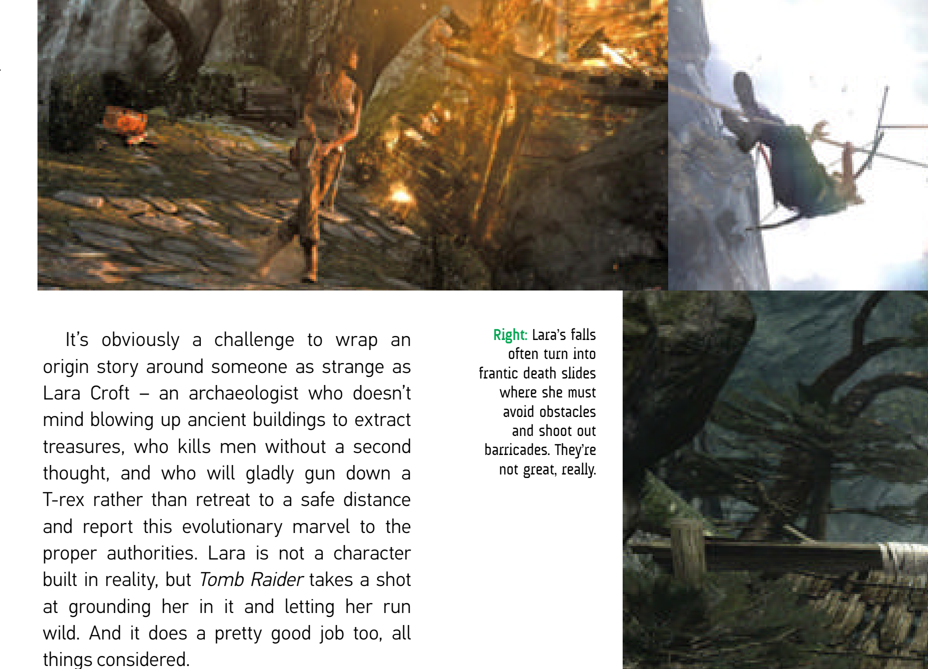
10-12 hours. You can revisit areas to harvest collectables, but it's not great. We spent most of our replay time shooting chickens instead.

Q. WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR THE STORY?

Rhianna Pratchett; she's written the *Overlord* games and did her best to patch together the story in *Mirror's Edge*.



Right: Unusually for a game starring a female protagonist, not one character uses the word 'bitch' in their dialogue. Which is nice.



Right: Lara's falls often turn into frantic death slides where she must avoid obstacles and shoot out barricades. They're not great, really.

It's obviously a challenge to wrap an origin story around someone as strange as Lara Croft – an archaeologist who doesn't mind blowing up ancient buildings to extract treasures, who kills men without a second thought, and who will gladly gun down a T-rex rather than retreat to a safe distance and report this evolutionary marvel to the proper authorities. Lara is not a character built in reality, but *Tomb Raider* takes a shot at grounding her in it and letting her run wild. And it does a pretty good job too, all things considered.

AT ONE POINT SHE EMERGES FROM A LITERAL RIVER OF BLOOD AND MURDERS EVERYONE IN THE ROOM WHO ISN'T EXPRESSLY HER FRIEND

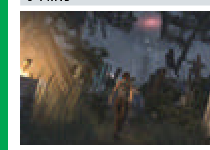
Below: Buildings often catch fire and explode for no reason when Lara walks near them, because that's just the kind of girl she is.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

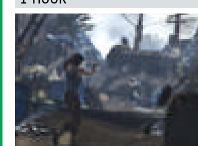
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

5 MINS



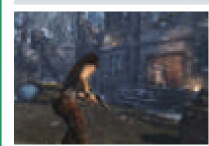
Hanging upside down in a cave on fire. It only gets worse from here on in. Pretty soon wolves turn up and try to eat your face off.

1 HOUR



Your very first kill! A nice bit of acting by Camilla Luddington, marred by a frustrating QTE. *Immediately* followed by three more kills as you fight your way up the mountain…

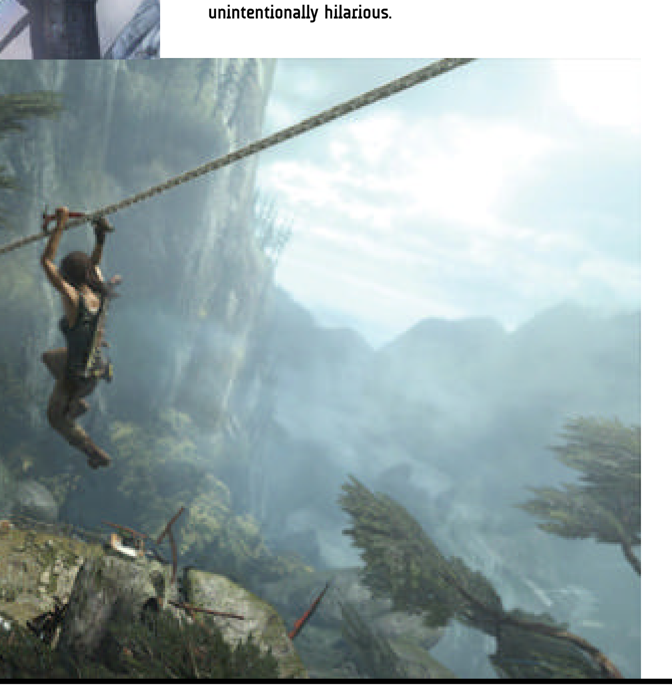
3 HOURS



…and then a whole bunch more as you pick up an assault rifle and really go to town. Later, you'll bolt a grenade launcher onto it. The baddies might as well go home.

THE MANY DEATHS OF LARA CROFT

Early detractors of the game said that it amounted to torture porn, and… well, they're wrong. But Lara does get put through the wringer an awful lot. Failing a QTE or messing up the controls on one of Lara's falls down a steep slope results in her death, shown in grisly detail. She's impaled – often through the neck but sometimes through the abdomen, especially on the spears of the elite bad guys when they're not slitting her throat – but she's also torn apart by wolves, strangled, crushed by falling rocks, and drowned underwater after bashing her head on a rock. It's all aimed towards making survival sweeter, we're sure, but the Grand Guignol can often end up unintentionally hilarious.



While the trailers make a big deal out of Lara's deer-hunting expedition, there's almost no hunting in the game past that first incident. You're occasionally menaced by wolves or given the option of shooting a wild boar, and you can gut them with an arrow if you'd like, which somehow rewards you with XP. It's not clear whether Lara eats the animals or just enjoys mutilating their corpses, but the rewards contained in these XP bags – or, as the Spanish would say, piñatas – are rarely worth the fuss.

XP can also be earned by killing men, which you'll be doing a lot, and exploring the environment. Much of the puzzle gameplay that formed the backbone of the series up till now can be found in out-of-the-way 'secret' tombs. Each typically contains a single puzzle focused on timing mechanical objects in the environment, and a treasure map at the end shows the location of many of the optional pick-ups in the area – so the reward for exploration is more exploration, which can often feel frustrating.

Apart from this, exploration and traversal are tied to equipment, gating off areas until they're unlocked: pickaxes enable Lara to climb craggy surfaces like she's in *Vertical Limit*; rope arrows can attach her to distant items; barricades can be blasted away by shotguns; winches let her pull heavy objects, and so on. There's fun to be had revisiting the island once the game is over to collect every last item, carry out the fairly arbitrary tasks and hoover up all that XP. But, in reality, there's not much point to doing so, as getting better at killing isn't much of a reward when almost everyone on the island is already dead at Lara's hands.

There's an awful lot to like about *Tomb Raider*. It takes the gameplay *Uncharted* has used to such great effect (which was, of course, nicked from *Tomb Raider* in the first place), and replaces wise-cracking gentleman-thief Nathan Drake with this new damaged Lara Croft, one of the most involving characters seen in a computer game to date.

It asks some questions about where we've come since Lara's creation and reforges her as a blood-soaked killer not really suited for civilisation, which is entirely appropriate given the calibre of videogame storytelling we've seen emerge since 1996. This is a product of an industry starting to look inwards upon itself while still making fantastic games, a title along the lines of *Far Cry 3* or *Spec Ops: The Line*, and while it's not perfect by a long shot, it's one of the best *Tomb Raider*s you'll ever play.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

AN OVERBLOWN CONCLUSION. No spoilers, but the fantastic down-to-earth narrative that powers the game peters out towards the end. It shoots for an epic confrontation, but ends up ringing a bit hollow.

VERDICT 8/10

SUPERB, GAME-CHANGING STUFF FROM OUR HEROINE

SOMETIMES THE CLOTHES DO NOT MAKE THE MAN – SOMETIMES THEY'RE ALL THERE IS

Crysis 3

The *Crysis* franchise has always been predicated upon the implementation and depiction of technology. Conversations about the series usually revolve around Crytek's powerful CryEngine or its in-game tech, toys and gadgets. It was Crytek's desire to create a near-future, future-proof PC shooter that led to the original *Crysis* being initially too ambitious to bring to console. Then it was *Crysis 2*'s more inclusive, less ambitious recommended specs that led to grumbling that the sequel was not the technological benchmark its predecessor had been.

The launch of *Crysis 3* comes as developer Crytek is undergoing a transition, moving to embrace the oft-maligned free-to-play market with its CryEngine 3-powered online shooter, *Warface*. Features are being shared across *Warface* and *Crysis 3*, and, as such, Crytek is literally giving away the technology that forms its flagship series' unique selling point. The question, then, is whether what's underneath the technically impressive exterior of *Crysis 3* justifies this third outing for the Nanosuit and the traditional retail price tag.

As was the case with its predecessors, the most engaging stories of *Crysis 3* emerge not from its linear narrative, but from its ability to facilitate a degree of free-form player expression. Using a combination of the Nanosuit's powers and a varied arsenal, you curate your own adventure that focuses on the how, rather than the why. So, while the entity known as Prophet battles against the familiar backdrop of human/alien machinations for world domination or destruction, you focus on the more engaging prospect of finding the most rewarding and empowering combination of stealth and aggression.

It is to Crytek's credit that it avoids the well-worn convention of providing a glimpse of a superpowered protagonist and then stripping them of all of the interesting bits for you to regain throughout the story. Right from the off, you are made to feel empowered. The Nanosuit's augmented strength, shell-like armour and near-invisibility offer multiple approaches to negotiating your escape from a CELL-controlled tanker and subsequent journey through a ruined New York. This empowerment is further enforced throughout the story by the presence of Prophet's erstwhile squaddie and formerly Nanosuited cockney, Michael 'Psycho' Sykes, who has been skinned of his suit and deprived of his demigod status.

The story is as much about Psycho's emasculation as it is Prophet's emancipation. The interaction between the former peers serves to reinforce your own superpowers, while Psycho's naked humanity provides an interesting counterpoint to Prophet's role as part-man, part-machine, part-alien technology. Psycho is painfully aware of his limitations as a standard human soldier, which makes him by turns envious and resentful of the power, something that both Prophet and the player could otherwise easily take for granted. Psycho grounds the story, providing its human focus and, as a number of the story's big reveals fall flat, offers an

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STORY TIME Crytek's attempts to flesh out its narrative lead to a handful of text and audio logs being buried in staid menu screens. Peripheral NPCs could use sharper writing to be more interesting.

CHARACTERISATION AND NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT GIVE WAY TO THE VERSATILE UPGRADE OPTIONS OF THE ICONIC NANOSUIT



DETAILS

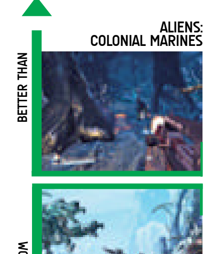
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Crytek
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: While the environments convey a certain ruined beauty, the New York of 2047 looks so long-abandoned that it fails to convince it was ever anybody's home, lending it a shallow verisimilitude.



Above: *Crysis 3*'s opening passage takes place on a slick, rain-beaten tanker in the dead of night, calling to mind the opening of Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid 2*. As with that exemplary title, a stealthy approach is advisable.

Left: The Predator bow lives up to the hype, offering a wealth of combat options against all manner of human and alien assailants. Stats revealed it to be games™'s weapon of choice.



TAG, YOU'RE IT

Besides the headline powers of the Nanosuit, it also comes equipped with a multi-purpose visor. In addition to being able to detect body heat, the visor can identify and tag enemies in the area. Tagging enemies helps keep track of their whereabouts and confers an aiming bonus against them, should you wish to sacrifice stealth for wholesale slaughter. The visor also allows for remote hacking of security barriers, primed mines and security turrets that can be turned against your would-be assailants. Hiding in the shadows and having the enemy's own ordnance do the work for you may not seem heroic, but it certainly helps even the odds against the multitude of murderous men and aliens.

Left: There's little time to admire the scenery. Prophet is often either the hunter or the hunted, and eerie silence can give way to explosive gunfights at a moment's notice.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS

Freed from captivity by former-squadmate Psycho, Prophet sets about escaping his floating prison by utilising the miraculous Nanosuit. Guns blazing or silent stealth, the choice is yours.

7 HOURS

You've battled through a dilapidated New York and Prophet's visions have come to pass with few surprises. You've concluded that the Predator bow should feature in every game.

3 DAYS

Multiplayer fame beckons and you've graduated to the point where you no longer need the default combat aides. You're a lean, mean, stealth-cloaked killing machine.

evolving focal point for the player to care about.

Psycho aside, it's hard to be engaged by the narrative, and not only because it's standard sci-fi fodder. Blatant clues as to the story's direction mean most players will have pieced together the plot's deeper mysteries long before they are formerly unveiled. Meanwhile, optional audio logs that dig deeper into the lore can only be played via a static menu screen, necessitating a break from the action to listen to a minute or two of laboured exposition.

If Psycho is the story's real catalyst, it's Prophet and his wonderful toys that provide the gameplay evolution. Crytek has carried over the Nanosuit's trio of powers from *Crysis 2*. It idles in Power mode, facilitating Prophet's feats of sprinting, exaggerated leaping and ability to punch people and aliens to death. Cranking the suit all the way to 11 with Armour mode enables Prophet to shake off direct rocket fire and walk away with little more than a headache. Cloak mode turns Prophet invisible and provides the most strategic suite of combat options; this is most readily apparent when it's combined with the Nanosuit's adaptable upgrades and Prophet's newest weapon, the Predator bow.

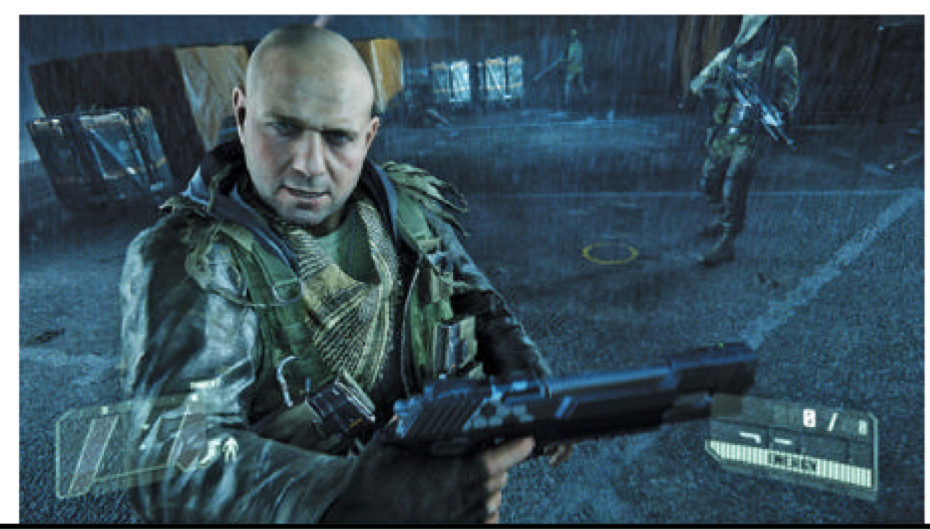
Like Prophet's suit, the Predator bow adapts to your play style. A varied selection of arrowheads offer the options of a silent takedown or causing chaos with explosive, electrical and air-burst tips. Its draw weight can also be adjusted to offer a weaker but faster firing mode, through to the brute-force stopping power of maximum resistance. Best of all, the bow forms an ever-present part of Prophet's arsenal by supplementing the familiar two-weapon setup, so you need never be without it.

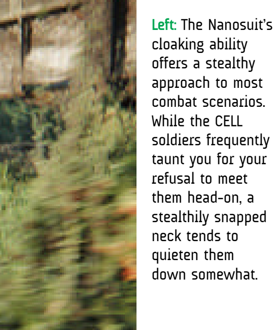
There's a good reason that the Predator bow features in much of the promotional material for *Crysis 3*. It's well-balanced, versatile, enjoyable to use and feels like a key part of Prophet's identity. Not to be outdone when it comes to providing varied and customisable

A NEED FOR SPEED

Crytek has done an admirable job of coaxing the necessary performance from aging console architecture in order to render its vision of Mother Nature's reclamation of New York. Unsurprisingly, though, it's on PC that *Crysis 3* really shines. With a sufficiently powerful gaming rig, the crispness of the images that depict nature's fight with humankind's concrete jungle most appropriately complement the developer's vivid art direction. Enhanced lighting, particle and texture effects conspire to make PC the platform of choice for Prophet's final fight. Crytek seems at once adamant to prove that CryEngine 3 can happily cater to a broad range of platforms, while the eye-watering recommended specs for *Crysis 3*'s highest-performance settings divulge the developer's renewed desire to bring the majority of home setups to their knees.

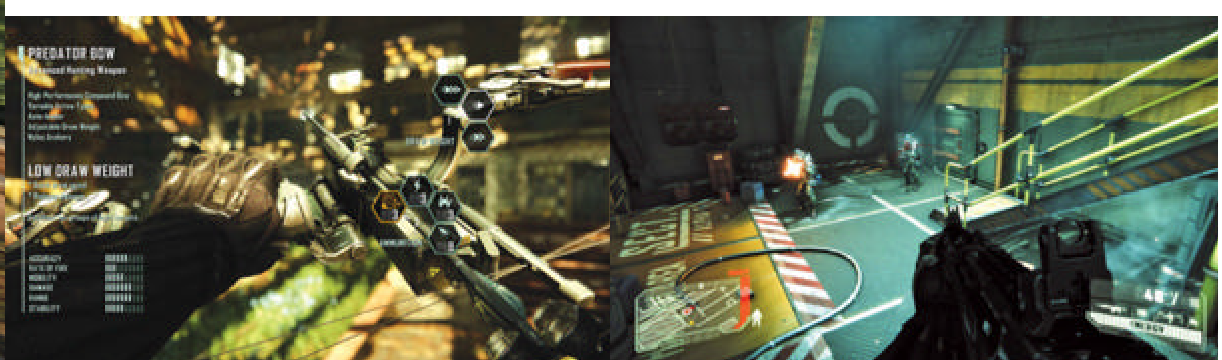
Below: It says something of your protagonist when his personality pales next to that of his sidekick and suit of armour.







Left: The Nanosuit's cloaking ability offers a stealthy approach to most combat scenarios. While the CELL soldiers frequently taunt you for your refusal to meet them head-on, a stealthily snapped neck tends to quieten them down somewhat.



Left: The smaller members of Ceph's forces can be tackled directly, but larger opponents require full use of the Nanosuit's capabilities to bypass their defences.

gameplay options, the Nanosuit's overhauled upgrade system also shines. Like power-switching and weapon customisation, the Nanosuit can also be adapted on the fly. Upgrades range from standard fare, such as boosting health regeneration and bolstering the Power, Cloak and Armour functions of the Nanosuit, to more specialised options for assisting system hacking, granting improved EMP protection and further boosting weapon stabilisation. Once unlocked, Nanosuit upgrades can be clustered into sets of four and flipped between on the fly, ensuring that you benefit from the most appropriate bonuses in any given situation. The upgrade system confers a degree of player control over what would normally be a passive set of perks, though it's not until the campaign is tackled on hard difficulty or above that this management becomes truly necessary.

Customisation also plays a big part of the fully featured multiplayer modes. Genre staples of team deathmatch, capture the flag, and king of the hill are bolstered by the adaptable arsenal, choice of Nanosuit upgrades and four predefined classes. It's still the players with the best twitch reflexes that are going to come out on top, but less experienced players are eased into the fight with combat aides that are activated after several successive deaths. More strategic multiplayer options come in the form of modes that pit CELL operatives against Nanosuited players and require the download of data, or the asymmetrical and highly publicised Hunter mode.

Hunter is the most high profile of *Crysis 3*'s eight multiplayer modes. It starts with two perma-cloaked, Nanosuited hunters armed with bows stalking up to ten human soldiers armed with conventional weapons and proximity alarms. It's the embodiment of the film *Predator*, with the added quirk that as the hunters pick off their prey, the soldiers are converted to the cause of seeking out their former teammates. It's a tense showdown that encourages team communication, otherwise the hunted find their numbers swiftly thinned. Key decisions revolve around whether the survivors should stick together as a unit in the face of the near-invisible aggressors, or if they should scatter to the four corners of the map in the hope of finding a hidey-hole to see out the round. Of all of the multiplayer modes in *Crysis 3*, Hunter is the most interesting because it builds on the premise of the game's fiction and asks more of you than a fast trigger finger.

Technology is a key part of *Crysis 3*'s identity. While its environments combine the lush surrounds of the original title with the urban jungle of its sequel, they play second fiddle to the depiction of near-future technology. Similarly, characterisation and narrative development give way to a customisable weapon set and the versatile upgrade options of the iconic Nanosuit. By facilitating a player-led approach to combat, *Crysis 3*'s six-hour, single-player campaign is as fun as you make it. However, the multiplayer mode is soon to have competition from Crytek's own free-to-play *Warface*. These individual facets combine to put *Crysis 3* in a peculiar position and mean that, while it's worth the entrance fee, it may soon find itself redundant.

Above: Weapon modifications are plentiful and available on the fly, though this is more useful in multiplayer than in the single-player campaign.

THE MOST ENGAGING STORIES OF CRYSIS 3 EMERGE FROM ITS ABILITY TO FACILITATE A DEGREE OF FREE-FORM PLAYER EXPRESSION

FAQs

Q. HOW PROPHETIC IS PROPHET?
Well, he has visions of a bleak future and is on a mission to save the world. He justifies his designation.

Q. IS HE ACTUALLY HUMAN?
Debatable. A mix of man, machine and alien technology, even his allies question his humanity and what's lurking under that visor.

Q. WHAT'S HE FIGHTING FOR?
A world free of the control of the shadowy organisation known as CELL and an alien race called the Ceph.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SHARP DRESSER: *Crysis 3* further refines the powers, upgrade options and gameplay styles afforded by its iconic Nanosuit; all of its features are useful, empowering and fun to experiment with.

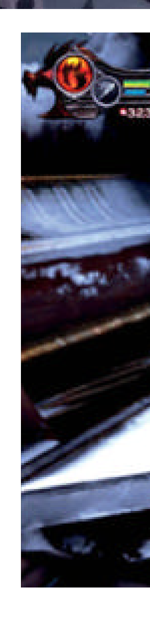
VERDICT 7/10
ITS BEAUTY IS BUT NANOSUIT DEEP

SPECIAL ATTACKS PLAY A FAR GREATER ROLE IN COMBAT THAN THE SHOW-STOPPING MAGICAL BLASTS OF OLD

POWER TRIP

On top of the usual arsenal of chain attacks and magic abilities, *Ascension* adds another layer of complexity with a series of unique skills. Though generally focused on puzzle-solving, they also have practical applications in combat, and while it can be easy to forget that they're there amid all the chain swinging and evisceration, they're remarkably useful in a pinch. Each has its own cooldown time to prevent abuse, though to be honest they're not the kind of thing you need to be spamming anyway; the temporary boosts you get from each are useful, sure, but nothing is as trustworthy in a fight as a couple of razor-sharp blades attached to several lengths of chain. Which is handy, because that's exactly what Kratos has.







Left: We didn't expect much from the single-player aspect of the game given Sony's pre-launch focus on multiplayer. Talk about a pleasant surprise...

YOU'LL DEFINITELY LIKE HIM WHEN HE'S ANGRY

God Of War: Ascension*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Sony Santa Monica Studio
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

An elephant's brain. A gorgon's spinal cord. A centaur's intestines. A hellhound's tonsils. These are just a few of the things we've seen – and can never unsee, troublingly – while in the company of *God Of War: Ascension*. Sure, Sony's Santa Monica studio sent a message when it forced players to watch Helios' flesh stretch and tear as Kratos wrenched off his head, but that message isn't so much reiterated or echoed here as bellowed and barked; bad things are going to happen, most enemies are going to need to get 'some assembly required' tattoos and lots of things that weren't red before are going to be red. Very, *very* red.

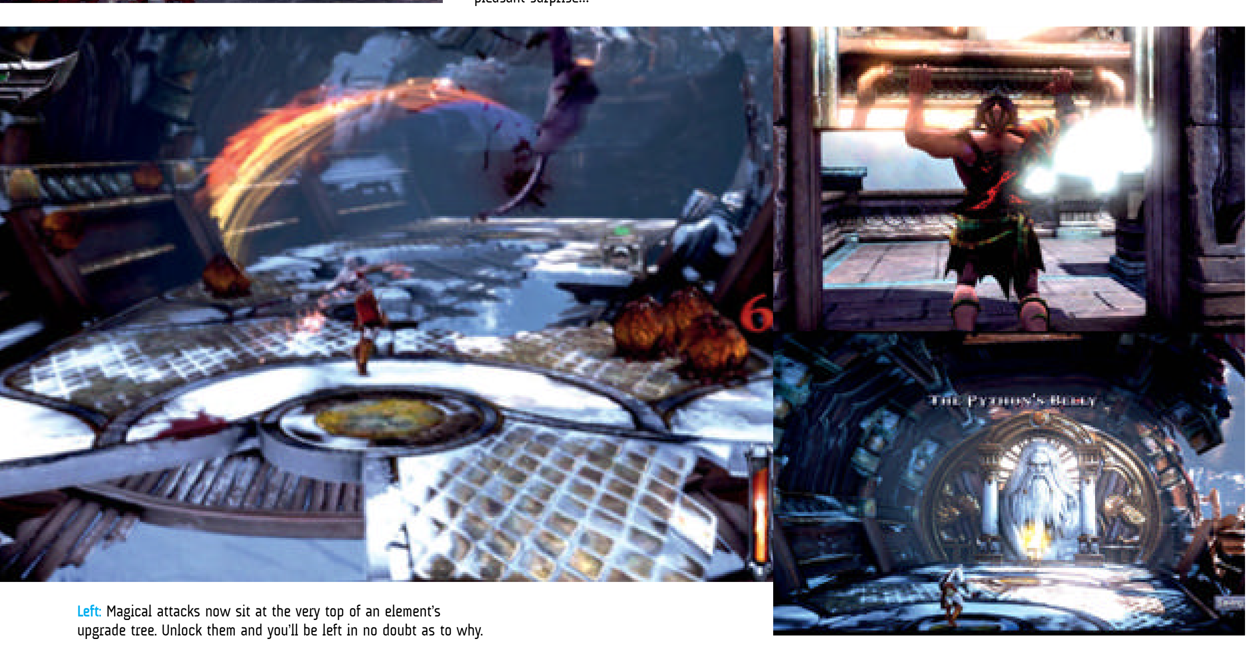
So yeah, in case you somehow didn't work it out from that, *Ascension* is brutal. The more the mythology pool dries up, the more the team has to get creative with its creatures and the more graphic the violence becomes. Kratos' trilogy may have ended, but his murder spree most certainly has not. Set prior to the events of the original game (but after its flashbacks, somewhat confusingly), *Ascension* follows Kratos as he looks to sever ties with Ares before exacting his revenge. For such a simple premise, it's a rather confusing telling of the tale; both gameplay and narrative hop back and forth along the timeline, and while this affords the game a few novel moments, the fact that there's room for head-scratching means it probably hasn't done its job as well as it could.

FINGERPRINT

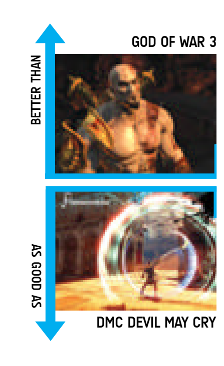
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNCHAINED: *Ascension*'s single-weapon focus creates surprisingly deep combat. The new elemental augmentation system is a stroke of genius and one that makes every single encounter satisfying.

That's the only real fumble on Sony's part, though, because in all other aspects, *Ascension* excels. The setup avoids the potential combat tedium of an unchained Kratos, yet the team also deals brilliantly with the fact that the signature chain blades should be the only weapon on offer. This is cleverly offset by a new system of temporary secondary weapons, akin to the bats and bottles of *Streets Of Rage* in that they're employed as they're found, each with their



Left: Magical attacks now sit at the very top of an element's upgrade tree. Unlock them and you'll be left in no doubt as to why.



Left: *Ascension* is the toughest *God Of War* game yet, largely because of the radical changes to the combat system.

own move sets and practical uses. Equip nothing and Kratos resorts to a good old-fashioned boot attack, which can disarm some weaker foes, but, generally speaking, you'll want something in that slot to grant you a little extra versatility should you get into a fight. Which you definitely will.

While the secondary weapon system can almost be ignored if you so choose, the changes to the Blades Of Chaos simply cannot. Several existing gameplay mechanics have been cleverly fused into one here. Although the chains are your only weapon, four types of magic now act as modifiers or, if you will, stances that alter how the blades behave. It's a subtle but utterly ingenious change, and while it might frustrate returning players to not have access to their new magic attacks straight off the bat – these must now be learned by levelling up the power in question – the unique properties and special attacks now offered play a far greater role in combat than the show-stopping magical blasts of old.

Each of the four elemental enhancements almost turns Kratos's blades into a different weapon – properties change slightly, as do move sets in order to match the particular specialisation. One places the focus on stunning enemies, thinning their numbers and in turn setting weakened foes up for powerful and practical grapples. Another emphasises speed, while others let you easily break through defences or lock enemies down while you wail on them. With all four switchable on the fly, Kratos's single weapon is somehow his most versatile arsenal yet. This is the biggest change to the core combat system in the series' history, but it's so natural and well-implemented that you may not even notice it at first. Each element is introduced with a trial that subtly teaches which enemy types are most vulnerable to its unique effects, and if you notice combat getting tougher than expected it's probably because you're not mixing up attack types enough. Not that there's any shame in that – it's a mechanic that takes some getting used to in order to get the most out of it, but when it clicks you'll be unstoppable.

This elemental infusion bleeds into the game's rage mechanic as well, resulting in another interesting and practical evolution. Whereas Rage Of The Gods used to be a stackable damage boost that was best saved for boss battles, this new version requires far more strategy and far more skill. The meter is effectively a style gauge with purpose, quickly filling as your blades cleave through the flesh of mythology's finest but dropping whenever you take damage. Max out the bar and a tense risk/reward element comes into play; carry on fighting well with Rage capped out and it significantly improves the damage and properties of many of Kratos's special attacks, but a single scratch will dent the meter and cancel the buff – making it important to know when to cut your losses and burn a full Rage gauge to unleash a potent, element-specific super attack. Again, you're forced to tailor your playstyle to each individual fight, but once you start to learn which elements and attacks

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You're looking at around eight to ten hours on your first play, with unlockable difficulties and New Game+ extras on hand to help multiply that figure several times over.

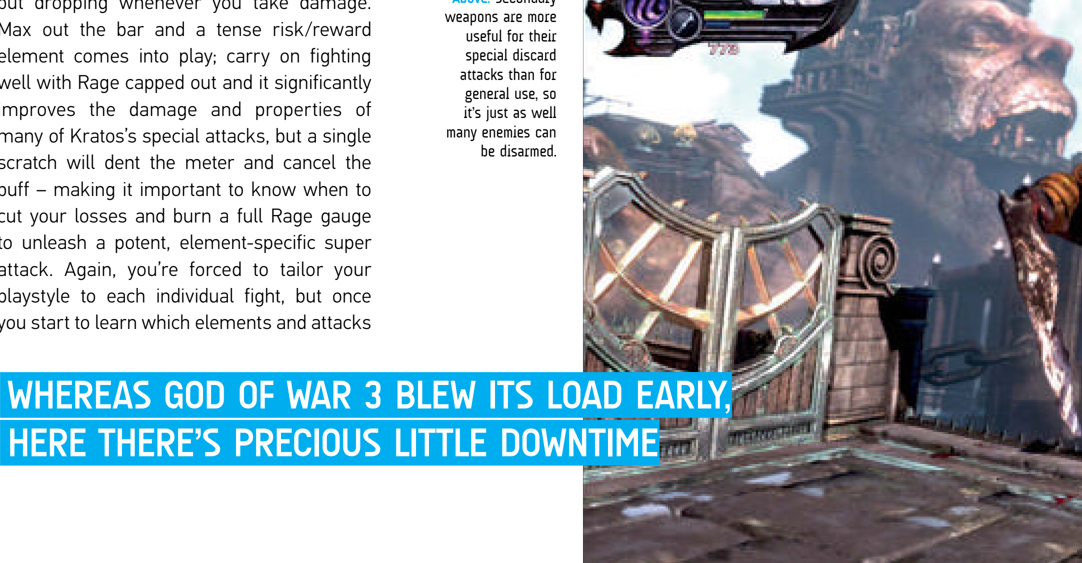
Q. DIFFICULT?
In places, very. Things do ease up once you get a feel for the various elemental properties and how best to use them in combat, though large-scale fights can still be tricky.

Q. WHY DIDN'T YOU REVIEW MULTIPLAYER?
Sadly, the early build we reviewed from wasn't online-enabled. The beta was great fun, so hopefully we'll be able to deliver a verdict on this new feature very soon.



Right: New Game+ only lets you go back through a difficulty level you've already completed, so you can't use it to tone down the more challenging settings.





Above: Secondary weapons are more useful for their special discard attacks than for general use, so it's just as well many enemies can be disarmed.

WHEREAS GOD OF WAR 3 BLEW ITS LOAD EARLY, HERE THERE'S PRECIOUS LITTLE DOWNTIME

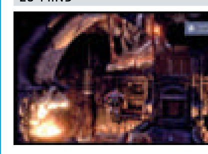
Below: Fury fans rejoice – Kratos is still gaming's angriest man and the shouting barely lets up.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

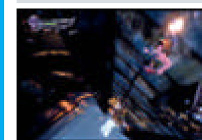
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



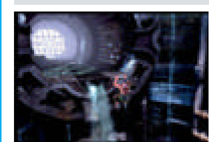
Yep, that was a typically insane opening. *God Of War* can always be counted on to start with a bang. If you were wondering how the team would top the Poseidon fight, wonder no longer.

4 HOURS



The new elemental weapon enhancements are starting to click, which is handy because fights are starting to get pretty tricky. No more spamming Square – it doesn't work any more.

3 DAYS



That's the campaign rinsed, but there's still loads to do. New Game+ beckons with its host of new perks, costumes and other such silliness, plus there's multiplayer to dip into as well.

SO FAR AWAY

If there's one criticism to be made of *Ascension*, it's that its insistence on showing as much as possible often leads to having to watch fights from the cheap seats – so insane is the scale at times that Kratos seems miles away. This can make matters a little confusing in the worst instances and make it hard to keep track of who/where you are, though the spectacle itself makes up for these momentary lapses for the most part. Perhaps being able to watch the action so closely over Dante and Raiden's shoulders has spoiled us. With its legions of enemies and hulking adversaries, *God Of War* has always liked to pull out to a wide-angle shot, so this is just Ascension playing to form.



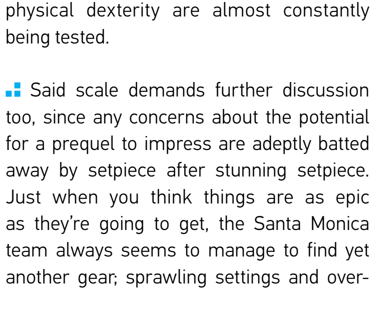
benefit most from a full Rage meter, it's enormously satisfying.

As too are the puzzles, actually. Demanding clever use of both environments and powers, these require an agile mind and nimble fingers, but are far more logical and fair than some in the franchise's history. With every piece of the puzzle laid out clearly, it's a matter of working out how they interact with one another – and how, if at all, you can alter them – before putting everything you've learned together and proving that your brain is capable of more than just running towards anything that moves and spamming the Square button. Despite how frequent these breaks from combat are, *Ascension* is brilliantly paced. Whereas *God Of War 3* blew its load early, here there's precious little downtime and outside of a few scene-setting wide angle shots that show off the game's ludicrous scale, either mental fortitude or physical dexterity are almost constantly being tested.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BLOODBATH: It wouldn't be *God Of War* if Kratos didn't leave a trail of severed limbs and internal organs in his wake. But it is, and he does. He really does. It's not a game for the faint-hearted…



Said scale demands further discussion too, since any concerns about the potential for a prequel to impress are adeptly batted away by setpiece after stunning setpiece. Just when you think things are as epic as they're going to get, the Santa Monica team always seems to manage to find yet another gear; sprawling settings and over-the-top boss fights are up there with the franchise's best, while clever little changes to the regular format make the action feel even more cinematic. The best of these is the 'buttonless minigame', a feature that evolves the usual QTE kills into a far more organic and exciting full stop to a fight. Each is like an additional phase to the fight, where move sets and attack patterns are changed up once the finish line is in sight, and with so much of the game played out from a distant camera angle, pulling in for a gruesome close-up as a fight winds up makes the action feel that much more impressive.

With Sony so laser-focused on the multiplayer component since *Ascension* was announced, we were understandably worried that the single-player side of things may end up a rote retread of old ground. But we've never been so happy to be proven wrong, and from its gorgeous visual and evolved combat to its lavish presentation and tight pacing, this is arguably the best *God Of War* yet. It takes a class act to follow Dante and Raiden so closely and match both for pace, but Kratos clearly still has what it takes. Just ask anyone or anything that stands in his way. Actually, don't. Because they're fictional and probably in pieces. Many, many pieces. Raiden would be so proud.



VERDICT 9/10
OFF THE CHAIN

TIME TO REJOIN THE HUNT

Monster Hunter 3: Ultimate

When it comes to Nintendo's consoles of late, we are willing to afford the firm the benefit of the doubt. More often than not our faith in the Big N is rewarded, but, as the months have crept by following launch, the release schedule for the Wii U is scarily sparse. So it falls to Capcom's wildly popular *Monster Hunter* series to tempt the core gamer into the clutches of dual-screen gaming.

In its native Japan, *Monster Hunter* is a guaranteed seller, but in the West… well, it continues to baffle us how *Monster Hunter* still hasn't broken into the mainstream. It's relatively straightforward to grasp – in fact, it's all in the name. *Monster Hunter* is a franchise that actively encourages you to find the largest conceivable weapon, team up with some buddies and battle spectacularly sized monsters. The idea alone is enough to entice even the most jaded of gamers.

Of course, beneath the surface of any *Monster Hunter* lies one of the richest action-RPGs around – it's a series that thrives on players correctly assessing situations, learning the lie of the land and preparing for the fight of their lives, and this was a precedent set long before *Dark Souls* became the go-to for an addictive challenge.

It's good to see, then, that not much has changed in the three years since *Monster Hunter: Tri* reached the shelves for the Wii in 2010. *Tri* provided Western audiences with an accessible entry into the series, a welcome move after the PSP's *Freedom Unite* erected a brick wall to the fun and dared players to cross it blindfolded. *Tri* struck a balance between the various systems and, thankfully, *Monster Hunter 3: Ultimate* provides much the same experience. In fact, it's an identical experience.

Monster Hunter 3: Ultimate is being released simultaneously for 3DS and Wii U, and sadly there are consequences for such a move. *Ultimate* marks the debut of *Monster Hunter* in high definition, but it's simply an HD remaster of the 3DS instalment, which itself is no more than an upgraded iteration of the aforementioned *Tri*.

In essence, *Ultimate* acts as an expansion to *Tri*, offering 170 new quests, 30 new monsters and over 2,000 new pieces of equipment. Sure, it treads familiar ground, but that's by no means a criticism. As always, *Monster Hunter* excels at its core design: hunting monsters. While the battles never quite have the exhilaration of, say, *Shadow Of The Colossus*, you can never tire of bringing an enemy crashing to floor with a weapon three times the size of your character's body.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Capcom
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Right: While the monsters look great in HD, the textures on the landscapes and characters are a little flat.



Above: The weapons never cease to amaze. If they aren't three times the size of your body then they simply won't be strong enough to get you through later quests.



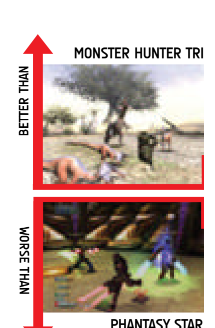


The monsters have scaled well, with enemies imposing their figures across the horizon. Tactically, the fights are usually frantic fun. As the game slowly ramps up the difficulty of the 'hunt, gather and capture' quests, you quickly need to identify your character's strengths and their limitations to properly assess a situation. Battles can typically last anywhere from two minutes to 20 – it's all about how well equipped you are for the job, served with a healthy slice of endurance. Most fights are genuinely enthralling; others are so difficult it'll be tough to distinguish between stress and fun.

Above: Fighting underwater usually leads to an unnecessary headache, as manoeuvring through the ocean isn't the easiest of tasks. Luckily, you can coax most monsters out of the sea onto dry land before serving them a good beating.

MECHANICALLY THE GAME IS AS TIGHT AS EVER. IT STILL REQUIRES PLENTY OF FINESSE, TIME AND CONCENTRATION TO PROGRESS THROUGH IT





FAQs

Q. JUST A PORT?
Yes, though we enjoyed *Tri* so much that we don't mind seeing it resurrected on a system with a better online infrastructure.

Q. FAVOURITE WEAPON?
A giant cello. Every time it hits, it strikes a different chord, which in turn lets you play a sweet bass solo, granting various buffs.

Q. SHOULD I REBUY?
The graphical upscaling isn't perfect, but *Ultimate* is still well worth playing for *MH* fans.

IT'S GOOD TO HAVE FRIENDS

Being an upscaled port of the 3DS version enables Wii U *Monster Hunter 3: Ultimate* to have an unprecedented level of connectivity with the handheld. Not only can you move save data across systems, but local co-op has also been included. games™ had the chance to sample the play and it works as perfectly as you'd expect, with gamers able to meet in the tavern lobby before setting off together. We're struggling to think of anything cooler than seeing your buddy hacking mercilessly away at a monster's legs in a desperate attempt to free you from its clutches.

Below: Not all weapons let you block, and so a pretty brutal learning curve presents itself. Some weapons swap the option to block with powerful combo moves; adept players will have no problems bringing even the biggest enemies to their knees.



Being a port and, more importantly, *Monster Hunter*'s debut HD outing, a lot of questions about its graphical prowess have been raised. While a lot of work has clearly been done to render the beautiful backgrounds – the Tundra and Volcano levels in particular look gorgeous – the textures and characters are surprisingly flat and lifeless. *Ultimate* isn't afraid to swing wildly between looking incredibly impressive to disappointingly lacklustre. It's not enough to distract from the task at hand, but the game's debut on an HD system brought with it certain expectations.

Expectations need to be managed all round, it seems. Disappointingly, *Monster Hunter* still includes the loading screens that have plagued past iterations, and it's especially curious how sparse the maps feel. Each area of the map includes but a few low-level monsters to slash through and once the big baddie appears, you're likely to spend a fair amount of time chasing it through empty areas, with a nice cut-scene break thrown in for good measure. Considering the power of the Wii U, we honestly expected a little more.

Mechanically the game is as tight as ever. It still requires plenty of finesse, time and concentration to progress through it. Capcom has made several tweaks to improve the core experience; the camera in particular makes it even easier for new players to get involved. Experienced hunters may baulk at the idea of a camera that actually tracks monsters as they blitz across a landscape, but in reality it's a fantastic feature to help players get accustomed to some of the more unwieldy weapons, such as the Saw Axe.

We found the GamePad to be more than up to the task. The second screen takes a lot of pressure away from the game's HUD, enabling players to customise the screen to suit their own personal play-style, with quick access to the map and inventory acting as useful assets in the heat of the moment.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EXPANDING A WORLD: As an expansion, *Ultimate* provides plenty to keep gamers occupied. 170 new quests should be more than enough, though Nintendo is promising free DLC packs – three per week.

Monster Hunter 3: Ultimate, much like *Tri* before it, is a shrunken experience when placed beside its PSP brethren, but the core tenets are still here. It's a relentlessly addictive game that will keep players entertained for weeks, even after the initial thrill of capturing dragons begins to fade. While we didn't get a chance to try the online multiplayer or co-operative features, the Wii U's GamePad also doubles up as a conduit for communication – so all players in your region have no reason not to talk strategy.

While a part of us wishes Capcom had taken *Monster Hunter* players on a brand new adventure for the series' HD debut, we can't take anything away from the core experience. As a port of a 3DS game – and an expansion of *Tri* – it's certainly impressive. We can only hope Capcom notes the desire in players' eyes for a little bit more in the future.



AN ACCESSIBLE PATH INTO A PUNISHING WORLD

WHO YA GONNA CALL?

Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

We certainly feel for Luigi; occupying a sibling's shadow is never an easy situation to live with, especially when that sibling is routinely getting the girl and saving the Mushroom Kingdom. This is a curse Luigi has had to bear since *Mario Bros* in '83, but it was through Nintendo's Gamecube that Luigi finally got a chance to shine in his very own adventure with *Luigi's Mansion*. It was a fun, if not flawed, launch title that whisked Luigi into the haunted avenues of Evershade Valley and tasked him with exorcising some demons.

A decade later, then, we are returning to the valley with *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon,* a 3DS exclusive sequel that capitalises on the premise of its predecessor in ways we never expected. The core concept has been meticulously expanded; the ghosts of the Gloomy Manor have gone hostile and only our brave Luigi, armed with the Poltergust 500, can restore a semblance of harmony to the chaos.

Dropping into the haunted hallways of the Gloomy Manor, the Haunted Towers and eventually the Clockwork Court, Luigi is tasked with cautiously exploring every nook and cranny in search of keys and treasure. Keys further expand the game world, opening new doors and revealing new mysteries to be discovered and solved. Thankfully, the mansions have evolved significantly over the decade, and while the intimacy of the original *Luigi's Mansion* remains, everything from level variation to the quality of the puzzles has been improved.

The mechanics have evolved as well. Luigi is now able to capture multiple ghosts at once, and with the improved Poltergust 500 at his side, ghostbusting has never been more enjoyable. Who would have thought it would be Next Level Games to perfect the formula?

While ghosts will appear to deter your search for progression, the Poltergust comes equipped with a powerful strobe light that will stun a ghoul long enough to punch a vacuumised photon-beam in their direction. While repetitive combat can sometimes grate in puzzle-centric games, *Luigi's Mansion* gets it right. The combat is in itself a puzzle, with different enemy types and variations appearing to drag Luigi into the underworld.

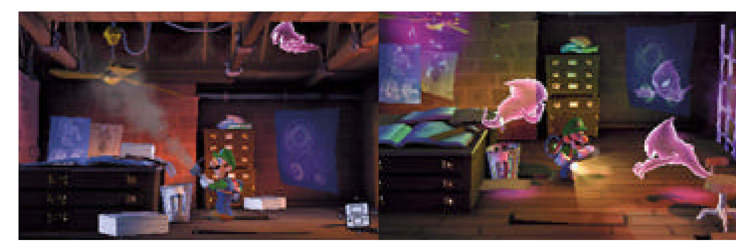
Utilising the 3DS' power, Next Level has created not only one of the most wonderful games to grace the system, but also one of the prettiest. The rooms are draped in shadow, the colours invert as ghosts invade your person and whacking the 3DS slider to maximum drapes the world in stunning stereoscopic 3D. It's a real beauty.

Next Level has found a way to return gamers to the world of *Luigi's Mansion* in a way that manages to retain its predecessor's wonderful charm, and not only that but it does so in a way that doesn't take the technical and mechanical aspects for granted. More perfectly than they could have hoped, *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon* fully executes Nintendo's original vision.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Next Level Games
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: 28 March
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No





Below: Luigi can now take on up to three ghosts at a time – no easy task, especially when they start vanishing and hiding behind furniture.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NINTENDO FLAIR: Mario games have become almost solely concerned with running you towards a greater coin purse. Luigi's adventures, on the other hand, are uncompromisingly fun affairs.

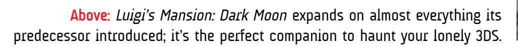


VERDICT 9/10

SHOWS THAT PREHISTORIC MARIO HOW IT'S DONE







Above: *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon* expands on almost everything its predecessor introduced; it's the perfect companion to haunt your lonely 3DS.



Above: It's not laugh out loud funny, but there's a good amount of humour present. The 'story' concerns a chicken against an army of feathered enemies; the fowl puns are unending.

RAMBO MEETS ABE

Rocketbirds: Hardboiled Chicken

It might sound like an *Angry Birds* rip-off – which, let's face it, would work well for the PS Vita – but if you simply must look for a comparison then look to Oddworld Inhabitants superlative *Abe's Oddysee*. But with more guns.

You play as Hardboiled, a gun-toting chicken – yes, chicken – as he seeks to destroy the oppressive leader of Albatropolis. If you still haven't figured it out, the story is quite a bit mental. It's the art style that really pulls it all together though, with a fantastic parallax scrolling-esque tilt mechanic adding a real 3D depth to the 2D world. Coupled with the gorgeous animation and the PS Vita's screen, it makes for some beautiful visuals that alone can sell the game.

But don't worry, there's a great game in there too. Though *Rocketbirds: Hardboiled Chicken* isn't quite as puzzle-centric as *Abe's Oddysee*, the similarities are there: each stage is a set of separate screens rather than a continually moving camera, you can use 'brainbugs' to take control of enemy guards. You'll even spend a large portion of the game rolling around instead of running – just because you can. There is a focus on combat here, however, which explains the variety of weapons you'll encounter throughout the game. Combat itself is fairly simple, even easy, so if you're looking for a *Metal Slug* wannabe you'll need to look elsewhere. Still, it's always entertaining, and the humour of the game does a good job to keep you fighting through.

There's plenty of variety tying each level together, aided by the careful mix of puzzles, platforming and combat. *Rocketbirds: Hardboiled Chicken* might not do much new or original, but it does have a considered approach to level design, meaning you'll never feel bogged down doing the same thing over and over again.

As for Vita-specific features, there isn't much included that makes it a must-have for anyone who has already played the PS3 version. Gyroscopic controls help make the parallax tilting of the world feel a little more natural, while the rear touchpad-assisted grenade or brainbug-throwing is a quaint, if not gimmicky, alteration to the game. Yet, just by virtue of being on Sony's handheld it is automatically the best version; these are the kinds of games that will ultimately sell the PS Vita, and if Sony can get more games matching *Rocketbirds: Hardboiled Chicken*'s quality then it could quite quickly turn the famished console's fortunes around.

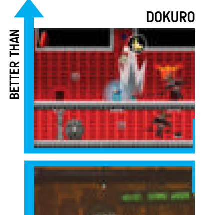
Both PSN and XBLA are filled with unoriginal and condensed titles, and in many ways *Rocketbirds* is just another to add to the list. But this would be overlooking Ratloop's hard work and devotion to making a game that not only stands out the instant you start playing, but remains worth playing right until the humorous end.

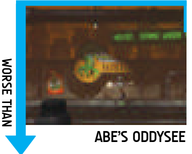
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Ratloop, Inc
DEVELOPER: Ratloop Asia
PRICE: £6.49
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

DOKURO





ABE'S ODDYSEE

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

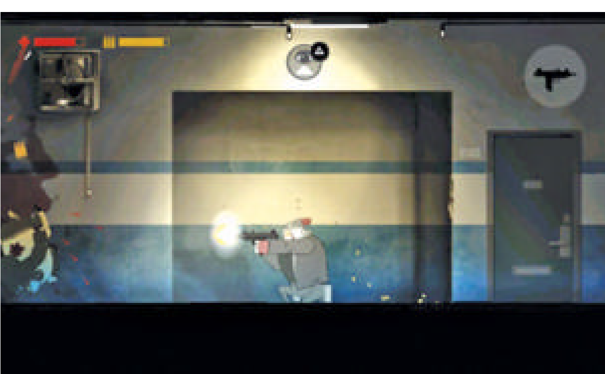
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

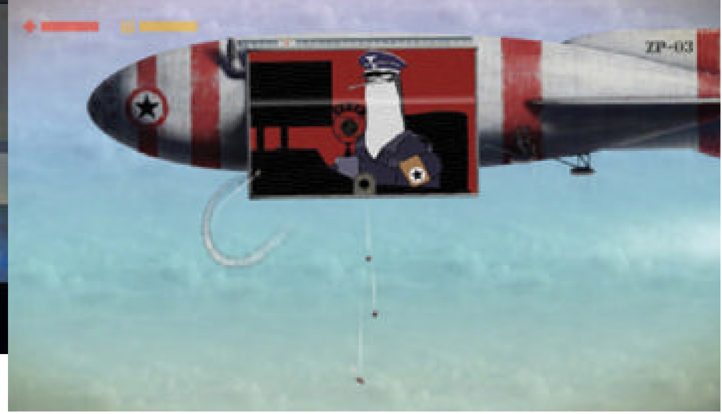
OOH LA LA: The gameplay isn't particularly original, but the art style is brilliant. The pseudo-3D 2D worlds work brilliantly, while the slick animation makes the game resemble a classic French cartoon.



VERDICT 8/10

A GOOD QUALITY GAME THAT'S WORTH YOUR ATTENTION





Above: The art style is difficult to show off in screenshot form; it's so reliant on the tilting effect, as Hardboiled – or even your hand movement – causes the world to shift.

GREAT - ANOTHER KEN WE DON'T LIKE ANY MORE

Fist Of The North Star: Ken's Rage 2

***Dynasty Warriors* and its countless spin-offs get a bad rap.** Yes, some of them are just about mashing buttons until you unlock someone with a better hat. Yes, you're likely to go through several controllers to fully complete them, given the impossible strain they put on the Square button. And yes, there are far more inventive (*Asura's Wrath*), satisfying (*Revengeance*) and visceral (*God Of War*) games about killing a bunch of dudes with very little effort. But get the right slice of Koei's now moon-sized *Warriors* pie, and it can be a delicious guilty pleasure, with elements of strategy, loot-hunting and genuinely rewarding combat sneaking into the mix. It's a genre and franchise so easily written off that claiming to enjoy a *Warriors* game almost feels like a gaming sin, but having played pretty much all of them, we can safely say that there are a few really good ones in there, so long as you know where to look. Rather unfortunately, *Ken's Rage 2* does not figure in this category.

The original game came under fire for not straying quite far enough from the *Warriors* template to do the *Fist Of The North Star* series justice, then *Asura's Wrath* came along and took the over-the-top, unlimited punching template to a whole new level. Koei's answer? To make this more like *Dynasty Warriors*. Sigh. The problem isn't even that it's too much like the usual braindead Squarefest – it's that it plays like what people think *Dynasty Warriors* plays like. You walk forward a bit, then punch 50 identical men until the invisible walls go away, then you walk forward a bit, and punch 50 identical men until the invisible walls go away, and then you keep doing that until the game decides that you've had enough fun. Only you haven't had enough fun. You haven't had *any* fun.

The frustrating part, though, is that it seems like it should be more difficult to make a *Fist Of The North Star* game no fun than it would be to make it fun. The previous game didn't exactly get it right, but it least it had the balls to deviate far enough from a one-size-fits-all template that accomodates samurai and feudal warlords as well as it does giant robots or cartoon pirates, but here we're right back to lowest common denominator button mashing. There are nods towards skill-based gameplay, sure, but when evading a single hit drains the same amount of meter as punching or kicking everyone 300-odd times, you have to assume you're being pushed towards a more offensive style of play.

Legend mode is the meat of the game, although veterans will notice that this sequel doesn't continue the story arc from the original game so much as retell it, and adds a bunch of extra fat before finally moving beyond it and picking up where the original

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Above: It's pretty damn ugly for a game this close to the end of the generation. That shouldn't matter, but… well, look at it.





Right: Signature moves are priced based on how powerful they are or how wide an area they affect. Some are *way* more useful than others, though. Balance…what's that again?

MOST DOORS REMAIN LOCKED UNTIL AN ARBITRARY NUMBER OF MEN HAVE BEEN PUNCHED

FURTHER READING: KEN'S RAGE 2 | SHOWCASE | ISSUE 128 | PAGE 39

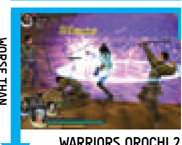


BETTER THAN

DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM



WORSE THAN



WARRIORS OROCHI 2

FAQs

Q. NO GOOD, THEN?
Nope. Weirdly, it's not that much fun to just mash Square and have super-powerful attacks happen.

Q. MUCH TO UNLOCK?
Hell, there's load. The real question is whether or not you'll have the patience to even see a quarter of it.

Q. BUT I LOVE FIST OF THE NORTH STAR!
Then go watch and/or read it again. And while you're at it, maybe read up on what a question is, because that wasn't one.

SCROLL LOCK

Grinding for the right upgrades is a staple part of the *Warriors* franchise and while the Scrolls system here is cut from the same cloth, the team could have at least have used a decent pair of scissors. Scrolls are dished out randomly as in-game loot and quest rewards, each offering stat upgrades to the equipped character. But better enhancements come if you can link multiple icons to form a Nexus, although this naturally comes down to luck rather than judgment. Line up multiple icons of the same type and the buff will be even greater, though forming anything more than the most basic kinds will require hours and hours of grinding.



left off. This new structure just makes it a chore to retread, too; at least in most *Warriors* games you can scythe through the amassed troops to take down generals quickly and blast through each mission, but here most doors remain locked until an arbitrary number of men have been punched. It's no longer a series of divided stories as it once was, either. Now you'll change fighter from time to time as the narrative dictates, although each new character can be properly put through their paces in Dream mode, where side stories pan out in a far more by-numbers, base-capturing *Warriors* format than does the franchise justice.

Even character progression has taken a turn for the worse. While levelling up individual styles and abilities might have been a little convoluted, this method – where experience earned is based purely on how you kill each identical grunt – simply doesn't work. Even though each character has their own arsenal of moves, you'll likely find yourself spamming the ones that get the job done quickest, and this will often mean grinding with weaker attacks to build up stats or ignoring them entirely. Grinding is nothing new in the *Warriors* world, and Free Play modes have long offered a way to buff your characters for the challenges that lie ahead, but not only is it not possible in the usual way (Ken's not unlocked in Dream mode from the off, for a start), there now doesn't even seem to be much to do beyond retrying tough levels and slowly improving abilities until the numbers tally up and you can get through a level. There's so little skill involved that it's exactly that, banging your head against a problem until it goes away. Maybe that's some brilliantly clever take on the franchise, but more likely it's just poor design.

There are flashes of decent design here, such as the Scrolls system and the way different characters offer different mechanics. But even die-hard *Fist Of The North Star* fans will come away with little more than a reminder of how they loved the series, so you can imagine the little impact this will have on anyone else. As an action game, it's one that doesn't exactly stack up well next to the likes of *Asura's Wrath* and CyberConnect2's *Naruto* games. As a tie-in, it's one that serves better as nostalgia for the subject matter than it does to introduce something awesome to a whole new audience. And as a spin-off franchise… well, it's already dead.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

YOU'RE ALREADY BORED: How can a game about punching people until they explode possibly be dull? *Ken's Rage 2* could do with an infusion of spirt that surpasses the physical self.

VERDICT 3/10

IT'S NO DYNASTY WARRIORS, AND THAT'S SAYING SOMETHING

Below: As elementary as it is, the shooting in *EDF* is pretty much defined by the jumbo-sized nature of the enemies. The sight of giant ants crawling up the side of a skyscraper offers an intriguingly creepy prelude to large-scale firefights.





Above: There are a number of boss encounters that function less well as part of the campaign; it comes down to finding a glowing weak spot.

THE LOW-BUDGET MONSTER MOVIE PASTICHE GOES HANDHELD

Earth Defence Force 2017 Portable

Earth Defence Force **is high-end junk, a series defined by deliberately limited mechanics and technically choppy scraps with giant B-movie monsters.** This surprisingly elaborate, digital-only port of the 2007 Xbox 360 entry turns out to be a fine match for the Vita at a time when it desperately needs new software, with a short-burst mission structure that suits Sony's handheld. The issue here is one of value; at £35, an already cult-centric release significantly narrows its appeal, yet *Earth Defense Force 2017 Portable* is still a laudably specific type of shooter that may have found its ideal format.

Essentially, Earth is being invaded by terrifying Japanese monster movie creatures – generally giant insects and robots – and only a brave group of men and women can stop them. You turn up with your chosen loadout, then shoot them all. That's the unpretentious premise. *EDF* is an unashamed excuse for large-scale, cheap-looking conflicts in cities that collapse like a display of cardboard models, with blood, explosions and unnecessary screen shakes (a silly effect that can be turned off) to amp up the silly drama.

For the uninitiated, *EDF* is like a showier, less tedious shooter version of *Dynasty Warriors*, a cathartic skirmish with hundreds of enemies. There's also a bit of progression behind the scenes, as you collect health and weapon upgrades after taking enemies out. *EDF* is an ideal time killer, with levels varied just ever so slightly in a way that'll pull you through the campaign despite its repetition. You have to accept roughness as part of *EDF*'s DNA. Once your brain is appropriately switched off, there's plenty of simplistic, meaty fun to be had.

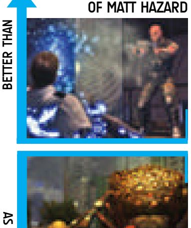
This Vita version features the addition of character Pale Wing from slightly superior PS2 predecessor *Global Defense Force*, giving you access to a jetpack from the start, which, in a type of game that's dead set on repetition, adds a slice of value to the campaign. Likewise, what looks pretty threadbare on HD consoles actually comes across as rather sharp on the Vita's screen; the strength of the port, then, means this is far from a quick knock-off onto a handheld device, and perhaps that's why *EDF 2017 Portable* demands such a high entry price.

Still, there's no real excuse for something that's obviously a budget shooter in every element of its design to be sold at full price, and it's that stumbling point that puts us off *EDF 2017 Portable* a bit – the almost non-existent online community doesn't exactly help that value argument, either. Nevertheless, if you can swallow the cost, Sandlot offers a silly insect-slaying experience that should be valued on a console that has recently been starved of such idiosyncratic releases.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Sandlot
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
EAT LEAD: THE RETURN OF MATT HAZARD



AS GOOD AS
EARTH DEFENSE FORCE: INSECT ARMAGEDDON

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

B-MOVIE TERROR: The enemies in *EDF* are insects and robots – deliberately uninspired sci-fi movie staples – yet they're the perfect match for *EDF*, a loving tribute to such imagery.





SATISFYING CULT SHOOTER AT A HIGH PRICE

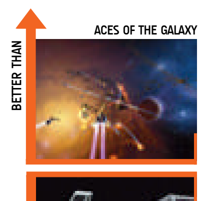
IN SPACE NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM (WITH COMPLETE FRUSTRATION)

Strike Suit Zero

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Born Ready Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
OS: Windows Vista, Processor: Dual Core 2.4Ghz, Memory: 4GB RAM, Graphics: NVidea 250 GTS/ ATI Radeon 4800 series, DirectX: 11, Hard Drive: 3GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
ACES OF THE GALAXY



WORSE THAN
TIE FIGHTER

If Born Ready Games' new release proves one thing, it's that it's high time we had a proper space combat game. Unfortunately, while *Strike Suit Zero* does a lot of things that are genuinely enjoyable, it also gets a hell of a lot terribly wrong. The end result is one of the most frustrating games we've played for some time.

This in itself is something of a pity, as *Strike Suit Zero* represents an interesting clash of Western game mechanics and Eastern design. The London-based developer has created an enjoyable sci-fi shooter, fusing elements of *Wing Commander* and *TIE Fighter* with the mech designs of Junji Okubo. The collaboration has created a truly beautiful looking game, with scintillating backdrops and impressive ship designs, which go some way to hiding the otherwise bland and clichéd story that unfolds over 13 varied missions. Unfortunately, all the beauty in the world can't hide the fact that there are some very ugly elements lurking beneath *Strike Suit Zero*'s impossibly glossy surface.

Pilot AI is a big issue, with your wingmen seemingly content to follow out their own orders. You're unable to give them commands, meaning many of the escort missions become an exercise in frustration, with you attempting to fight off the enemy hordes on your own. This is fine when you're in the titular *Strike Suit*, a transforming mech that recaptures the breathless combat of *Zone Of The Enders*, but for the majority of the time you'll be using a selection of other ships, from fighters to bombers, which are nowhere near as enjoyable to use.

Add in the lack of a mini-map, incredibly poor checkpoints and insane difficulty spikes, and *Strike Suit Zero* becomes an exercise in frustration as you fail to complete a mission due to the poor AI of your friendly support. It can also be difficult to work out new objectives, while clumsy button assignments can make battles needlessly tough when playing with a joypad.

We're really hoping that Born Ready Games can solve a lot of these issues with a patch, mainly because the core gameplay – when you're not babysitting cruisers in the boring escort missions – is actually a lot of fun. The ships, with the exception of the slow bomber, all handle well enough, allowing you to take part in some spectacular dogfights. The Strike Suit has some excellent combat mechanics that revolve around using Flux – earned from destroying enemies – to transform into your giant mech. In turn, this allows you to unleash a swarm of deadly enemy-seeking missiles. It adds a tremendous amount of satisfaction, but for some reason the developer rarely lets you use it, which is a real shame. And that pretty much sums up Ready Born Games' release: a selection of good ideas that are often poorly executed.



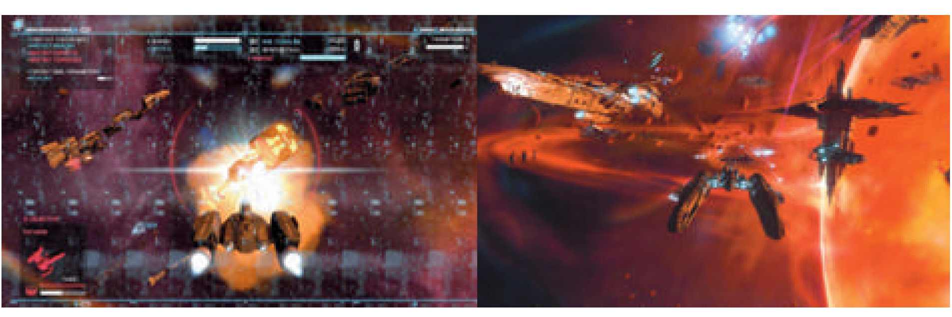
Above: The Strike Suit is a work of art, allowing you to string together ridiculous combos if you can get your timing of enemy kills right. Why Born Ready simply didn't focus solely on this mechanical marvel is beyond us.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BATTLE ONLINE: *Strike Suit Zero* is crying out for a multiplayer mode, so we're amazed that hasn't been included from the off. Online co-op would make missions a lot fairer as well.



Above: Escort missions never make for fun gameplay experiences, and *Strike Suit Zero* contains far too many of them. Protecting huge space cruisers becomes irritating when you're let down by your dopey wingmen.

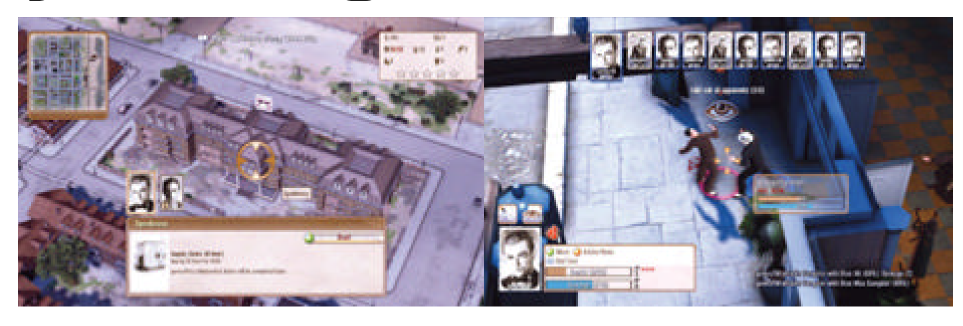


POOR EXECUTION RUINS GREAT SPACE COMBAT

WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT BEING A GANGSTER WOULD BE SO MUNDANE?

Omerta: City Of Gangsters

Below: The combat isn't nearly as engaging as we hoped it would be; at times it's archaic, but it's fun the first time you raid a joint with a gang kitted out with tommy guns and shotguns.



Tactical games have had something of a renaissance following the huge success of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown.* Don't get us wrong, *XCOM* meets gangsters is certainly an appealing prospect, but *Omerta: City Of Gangsters* never manages to even skim those lofty heights.

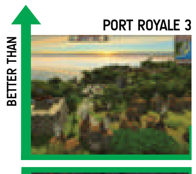
Set in the prohibition era of the Twenties, *Omerta* lets you slip into your sharpest suit as a Sicilian immigrant fresh off the boat in Atlantic City. *Omerta* wastes no time in letting you take in the sights though, throwing you straight into the acquisition and management of illegally brewed moonshine to start your rise to drunken power.

Omerta's a game of two halves: part inventory management and part turn-based combat – though it doesn't make an inspired effort to make either part particularly compelling. The management aspect steals the majority of your time, as you look over the city from an eye-in-the-sky perspective and order your gang to raid breweries for merchandise, shake down informants and generally seize parts of the city for expansion. Once you've brought in enough merchandise – lager, liquor and firearms – you can then ship it across the city. It sounds great as a concept, but in execution it's a disappointingly hands-off experience. The whole process is controlled through a series of obtuse menu screens, and, to be it frank, managing the books quickly moves from being interesting to unbearably mundane.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Kalypso
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-2 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
PORT ROYALE 3





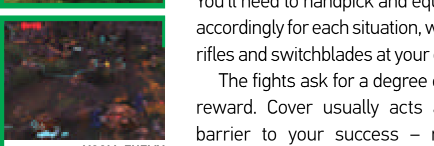
WORSE THAN
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Omerta also forces you to both wait for resources to accumulate and for businesses to become raidable again; long periods of play will be spent simply wasting away the time. The life of a gangster has never been so dull.

The game doesn't pick up much steam once the lead starts flying either. The gunfights are turn-based, staged across an isometric map. Each turn you're granted action and movement points that determine the choices available to you. You'll need to handpick and equip your gang accordingly for each situation, with shotguns, rifles and switchblades at your disposal.

The fights ask for a degree of risk versus reward. Cover usually acts as a natural barrier to your success – moving your mobsters out into the open to line up a shot could lead to a quick and bloody death when enemies slink in from out of sight. The combat offers a welcome distraction from the admin side of *Omerta*, but it never offers enough depth to become fully engaging.

Omerta will certainly keep you occupied for long periods of time, but only if you're punishing your attention span. The world itself is quick to drop you into the Twenties experience, but never amounts to more than a lifeless shell. Factor in some embarrassing voice acting, painful writing and a reluctance for *Omerta* to ever truly let itself go wild with its concepts, and all you'll be left with is a hollow and time-consuming experience.



SYNTHESIS

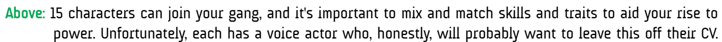
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

WHACK-JOB: The way resources are managed can quickly lead you to a brick wall of thumb twiddling. Think *XCOM* meets *The Simpson's Tapped Out* (but not as fun as that sounds).

VERDICT 3/10

MORE GANGSTER SQUAD THAN GOODFELLAS





Above: 15 characters can join your gang, and it's important to mix and match skills and traits to aid your rise to power. Unfortunately, each has a voice actor who, honestly, will probably want to leave this off their CV.



KNIGHTS AFTER DREAMS

Knights Of Pen & Paper

As the gold rush towards smartphone gaming continues, it can be easy to lose track of the hidden gems amongst the endless waves of releases. Time eventually helps lift those gems to the surface as word of mouth and reputation spreads. *Knights Of Pen & Paper* is one such game.

On the surface, it looks like a lovingly crafted tribute to 16-bit RPGs, a wonderful marriage of subtle chiptune music and buoyant pixel art. Yet, if retro aesthetic is its initial draw, clarity of gameplay is the main reason you'll stay. You'll begin by selecting the players from bizarre society stereotypes, such as Grandma, Jock, Pizza Delivery Guy and Little Brother. You then decide their class, which fall under the usual RPG range of Rogue, Paladin, Warrior and so on. Each class has their own special skill and four unique abilities, which can be levelled up. So far, so RPG.

Yet, rather than forming a party and roaming into the wild, you sit around a table where a dungeon master sits before you, handing out quests and drawing up each location. You ask the dungeon master for quests and then get to decide your level of challenge by selecting which enemies to fight and how many of them. There is travel to be done, but it's simply moving from point to point on a map, with each area offering new enemies and quests, plus the chance of a random battle.

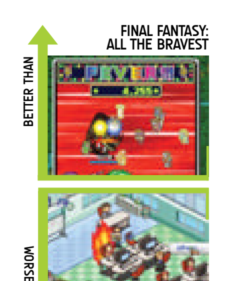
It's a cute spin on the genre, and one that cuts down on all the exploration and footwork, allowing the focus to be purely on the combat. Each character has a different role to play: Warriors are tanks who can buff their defence and draw attacks; Druids top up MP and cast status effects; Mages cast attacking spells and so on. With your group numbering five members once you have the money to buy extra slots, there's a lot of customisation and experimentation to be had, particularly as you can unlock further classes along the way, such as Barbarians and Bards.

It many ways, it's reminiscent of a Kairosoft title – its retro appeal is married to endless feedback loops, and dangled carrots of unlocking further character classes keep you going. Similarly, like Kairosoft games, there's also a lovely blend of modern humour throughout too, enemies uttering phrases like "ur so noobs" when you're close to death.

Knights Of Pen & Paper certainly isn't perfect. In particular, issues concerning balance creep in as you level up, with low-level nasties stopping progress as you're forced to battle them for miniscule reward, and some character class setups proving nigh-on unstoppable. But for £1.22, you'll be hard pushed to find a better mobile RPG anywhere – even if it took us a while to find it ourselves.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Behold Software
DEVELOPER: Behold Software
PRICE: £1.22
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

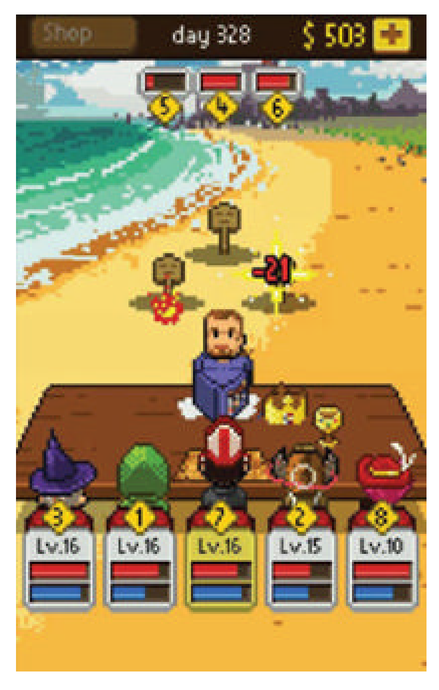
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

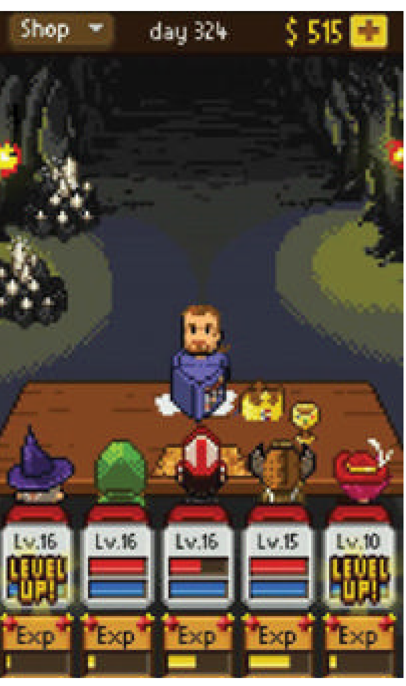
DUNGEON MASTER: The concept of sitting around a table rolling dice makes this feel like a pure tabletop RPG, while maintaining the look of genre classics from the 16-bit era.



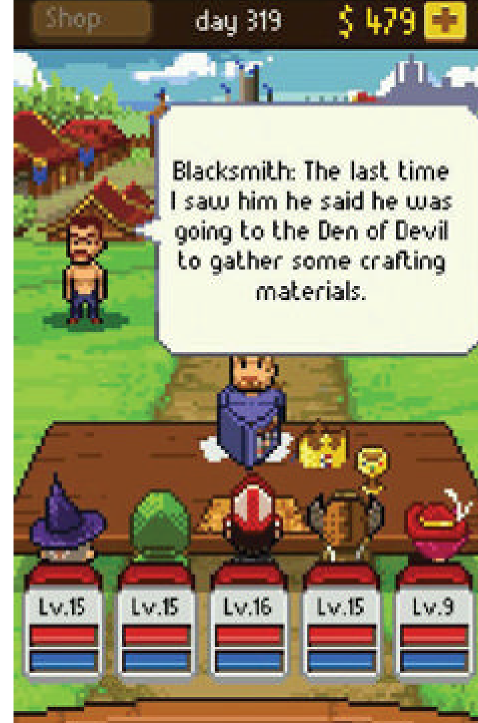
IT HAS HUMOUR, PERSONALITY AND REPLAYABILITY

Below: *Knights Of Pen & Paper* dons a retro aesthetic that'll take you back to the days of sitting in your parents' basement by monitor light.





Above: Your group can level up through quests and combat. *Knights Of Pen & Paper* constantly offers irresistable rewards.

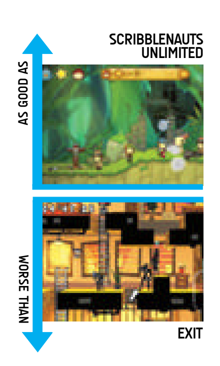


ANOTHER PRINCESS, ANOTHER CASTLE, ANOTHER DEATHTRAP TO BE AVOIDED

Dokuro

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: GungHo Online Entertainment
DEVELOPER: GameArts
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



With support for the PlayStation Vita still dwindling, it's becoming harder with each passing month to justify its position in the war for pocket supremacy. While *Dokuro* certainly isn't the game that'll restore lost faith in the much derided handheld, it might be reason enough to dust off the powerhouse and give it another run.

Dokuro is a captivating charcoal-drawn platform-puzzler that happily dances the line between charmingly entertaining and unforgivingly difficult, a trait that works much to its credit and disservice.

Borrowing its style from Nineties Tim Burton, *Dokuro* makes for an aesthetically pleasing romp through the Dark Lord's Castle. Considering how much time you'll spend navigating the castle's 150 deathtrap puzzles, this is no bad news.

The premise is simple enough: the Dark Lord has captured a helpless princess, the titular hero doesn't like his Lord's marriage plans, breaks the princess free and, by switching effortlessly with a double tap of the screen between realms, attempts to guide her out to safety.

And guide her you will. Much like *Ico*'s Yorda, the princess is either defiantly naive to the gravity of her situation or just has a penchant for death. She moves automatically across the 2D landscapes, often to much frustration. She'll walk into fire, onto spikes and into the arse-end of puzzles before you've had a chance to arrange the pathway to freedom.

Her obsession with death means you often have to work out ways to navigate the environments on the fly, or at the very least stunt her progress until you can figure out which tools at your disposal can get the job done. When *Dokuro* lets you work within the constraints of the game to find a solution to the puzzle at hand, it is playfully wonderful. When the AI robs you of a hard-earned victory, or simply reacts uncharacteristically, it steals that enjoyment away.

Thankfully, *Dokuro* introduces a clever progression mechanic into the mix, with each stage consisting of ten seamlessly strung-together puzzles. Overcoming one environmental hazard will checkpoint your progress, acting as a handy restart point for when you die. This works well for the most part, though *Dokuro* struggles with pacing. A lot of the puzzles can be completed in under a minute, but when the game decides to jack the difficulty up without warning, you hit a brick wall. Hard. Some puzzles had us perplexed for hours, contemplating the lack of a successful learning curve.

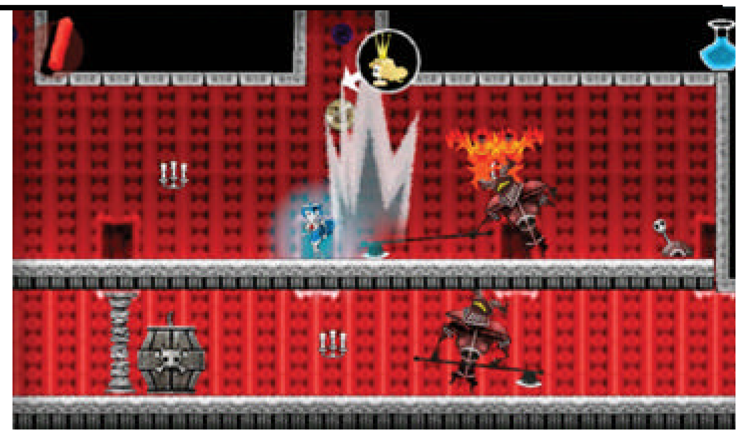
This wouldn't be so much of an issue, but when a lot of the failing in a puzzle is down to the princess's reluctance to stay consistent, having your puzzle reset is disheartening – rending the rest of the stage rarely satisfying to move through.

Despite its faults, *Dokuro* has enough style and longevity to be worth a look. The pacing can be an issue, the touch screen can cause intermittent problems (though for the most part its functions can be mapped to the keys) and some inconsistent AI can ruin the otherwise pristine level design. If you're in the market for something to do with your Vita, you could do much worse than *Dokuro*.

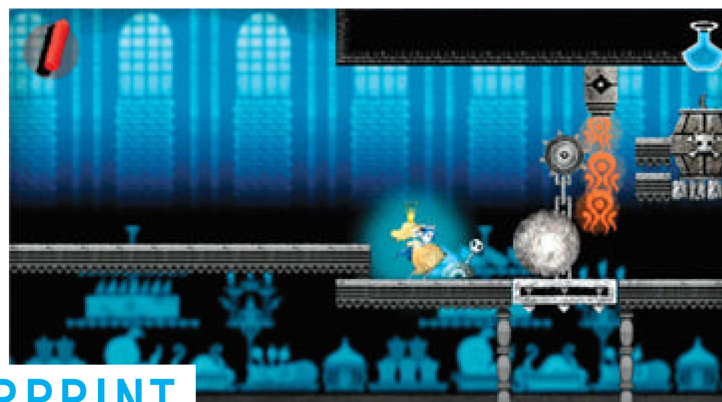
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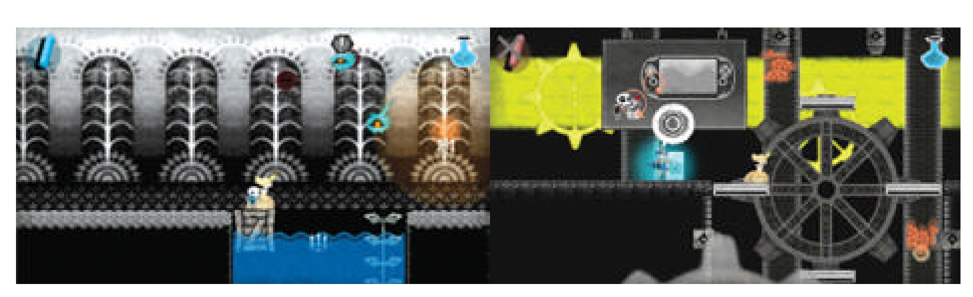
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BURTON WHO? *Dokuro* features gorgeous charcoal-drawn backdrops, evoking memories of a certain 'Nightmare before Scissorhands' era of the renowned movie director and producer Tim Burton.



Above: The touch screen has a unique purpose in *Dokuro*, letting you use chalk to simply attach platform to cog with rope and, later in the game, to light fuses and build platforms with different colour variations.





Above: The world springs to colour when you transition into human form, which is in stark contrast to the monochromatic white and black colour palette employed for every other facet of the world.

VERDICT 6/10
WISH THE PRINCESS WAS IN A LESS DANGEROUS CASTLE

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: SFB Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE FRIGHTENERS

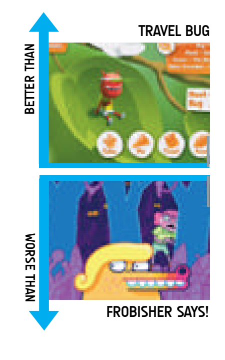
Haunt The House: Terrortown

***Haunt The House: Terrortown* is one of the first games on Sony's PS Vita that can be legitimately described as a title that rivals the sort of inexpensive experiences that have become commonplace on Apple's App Store.** It's evidence that Sony's handheld really can give gamers something different, and with smaller titles such as *Terrortown* delivering exciting new content, there's a real chance the Vita could find itself a wonderful niche.

For a small investment, *Terrortown* provides a beautifully formed nugget of gameplay that manages to make a simple premise ooze with ghoulish charm. Players take on the role of the classic ghost – think Casper – and with a number of nearby houses filled with the oblivious living, it's your task to possess inanimate objects and scare them into leaving. With a stark, almost expressionistic, side-on view, you're given the chance to haunt nearby hospitals, hotels, theatres and ships, and contained within them is a wondrous range of objects to utilise.

Discovering exactly what object does what is a joy, and as the terror increases your repertoire of moves does so along with it, really letting you go to town on the hapless inhabitants of whatever building you've taken up residence. Though the idea itself allows for some hilarious and occasionally quite dark moments, it's *Terrortown*'s visual design that helps bring it all to life. Experimenting with the plethora of tricks and watching the results can't help but raise a smile.

It's just a shame that it's over so quickly. Though we doubt anyone will have a problem with the money-to-gameplay ratio (it is, after all, part of the draw), *Terrortown* implements its premise and art design so well that you can't help but feel like there should be more.





VITA'S DEATH HAS BEEN GREATLY EXAGGERATED



THE WORST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

Final Fantasy: All The Bravest

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: BitGroove Games
PRICE: £2.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS
CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS: DECLASSIFIED
WORSE THAN
FINAL FANTASY III

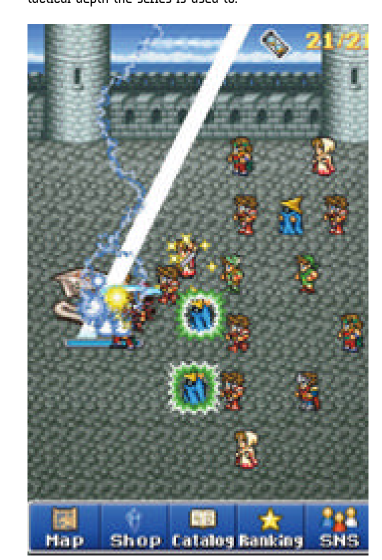
***Final Fantasy: All The Bravest* follows in the footsteps of Capcom's *Smurfs Village*, but fails miserably to understand why such casual games draw in large crowds.** Attempting to use Square Enix's classic series in an innovative way and provide players with a compulsive challenge – which also just happens to utilise microtransactions as an alternative way to progress – *All The Bravest* is quite shocking in its brazen attempts at getting players to hand over their money. As a way of dressing up minimal gameplay and indulging in some of the worst microtransactions we have ever seen, *All The Bravest* manages to miss the mark by a country mile.

Smurfs Village has become something of a poster child for mobile game developers hoping to capture players looking for a free-to-play experience with added microtransactions for additional revenue, and Capcom's game finds an interesting balance. *All The Bravest* employs classic Square Enix characters and gives players a grinding simulator with no actual reward for the time and effort they invest, and only by spending actual money will players ever get the content they seek.

At its most basic, *All The Bravest* gives players the chance to grind through battles by swiping up to 30 on-screen characters. It's a war of attrition with no regard for skill or tactics, and progression dishes out useless XP and worthless gil that can't be used or spent. To be in with the chance of using a random *Final Fantasy* hero from across the games, players are forced to pay for the privilege or face taking on the endless barrage of enemies with the standard archetype characters.

To make matters worse, once your characters take a single hit they're out for the count, and you're forced into waiting three minutes (in real time) until they can fight again. Add that time up across your 30 or so party members, and you'll be waiting upwards of an hour to continue playing. That Square Enix offers a payment to forgo this waiting time should give you some idea what *All The Bravest* is really about, and it has very little to do with fun, challenge or actual gameplay.

Below: Don't be fooled by the charming retro design, *All The Bravest* is barely a game at all. Constantly rubbing your screen is unrecognisable from the usual JRPG tactical depth the series is used to.



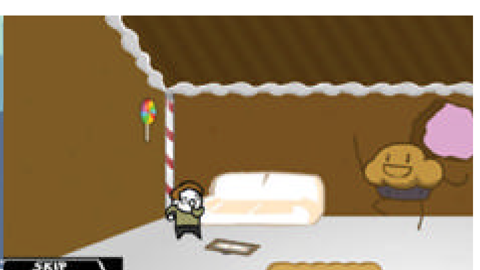
VERDICT 2/10
A GAME IN THE LOOSEST SENSE OF THE WORD

PERHAPS YOU SHOULD MAKE TIME…

No Time To Explain

Below: There's plenty of variety in the different worlds you enter. Our favourite is Cakeland, which sees the player chomping down cake in order to (intentionally) fatten up and smash rocks.





It somehow seems cruel to criticise an indie developer's first release. Funded on Kickstarter and achieving Greenlit status through Steam, *No Time To Explain* is clearly a concept people want to experience. And, for the most part, it manages to achieve that goal.

It's a platformer in the *Super Meat Boy* vein, but where Team Meat's intensely challenging meat grinder of a game oozed flair, *No Time To Explain* feels like little more than a tweaked version of the flash game that started it all. Still, the mechanics are sound; with a powerful beam gun, it's your task to utilise momentum to leap gaps and overcome the game's numerous challenges. Initially fairly easy, the game soon begins to ramp up, and it'll take all that practice playing *Super Meat Boy* to overcome some of the later challenges.

The humour, too, is well done. It's more internet slang than anything else, but that's who the game is aiming at, and you'll want to soldier on through just to witness the variety and originality in the game's entire concept.

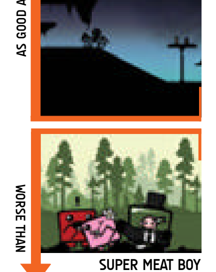
Because – although the system is in place – it does seem like *No Time To Explain* is a little rushed. Naturally, a pair of developers aren't going to have access to a solid quality assurance team, but on numerous occasions bugs prevented us from progressing until we restarted, while a lot of the animation is, well, unfinished. Hitting spikes or other dangers doesn't result in a restart; instead, your character will briefly glow red and then get plopped down on the last piece of stable terrain you were standing on. It would be remiss of us to not point out that a game like this, which provides dangers and obstacles as numerous as any other equivalent platformer, *doesn't* force you to restart. Is it intentionally forgiving? Perhaps, but the levels themselves aren't particularly long so it seems weird to exclude such design. This is doubly true in boss battles, which, as entertaining as they are, seem pointless if you can just stand there and take the missiles thrown your way without worry.

There's plenty of variety, though, and you won't be repeating any actions throughout. Shifts in the gameplay styles are regular but brief enough to keep you entertained, and the collectable hats – which let you customise your avatar's head – add a decent secondary task in each level. But even these won't make up for the relatively short amount of time you'll get out of *NTTE*. The entire game can be completed just shy of two hours, repeated deaths included, and though the entry fee isn't particularly high, combine this with the seemingly unfinished state of the game and you've got a hard sell for anyone that didn't initially back it on Kickstarter. It's a shame, because there's a great idea – even a great game – to be found here, it just needs work.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: tinyBuildGAMES
DEVELOPER: tinyBuildGAMES
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1GHz CPU, 512 RAM, 128MB GPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS
NIGHTSKY



WORSE THAN
SUPER MEAT BOY

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

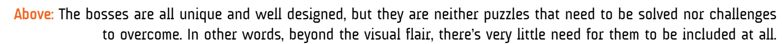
BACK TO THE PRESENT: *No Time To Explain* has the right elements to make it the next indie darling, but more effort needs to be done to tweak the game to perfection.



VERDICT 5/10
AS RUSHED AS ITS CONCEPT







Above: The bosses are all unique and well designed, but they are neither puzzles that need to be solved nor challenges to overcome. In other words, beyond the visual flair, there's very little need for them to be included at all.

RETRO

>"GAME OVER MAN, GAME OVER!" NO.133 MARCH 2013



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FEATURE

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... ALIEN

Looking back over 30 years of Xenomorph-themed videogames, games™ investigates the very best (and worst) the franchise has had to offer

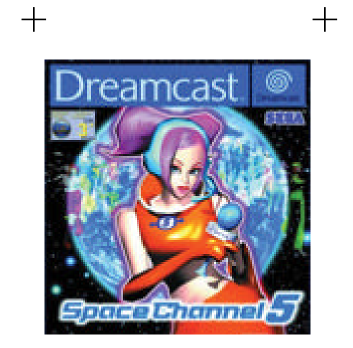
DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum www.gamestm.co.uk/forum



BEHIND THE SCENES

SPACE CHANNEL 5

Strap on those dancing shoes and feel the rhythm of the music. Space Channel 5 introduced an infectious beat that's still felt today, as producer Tetsuya Mizuguchi explains



Released: 6 October 2000
Format: Dreamcast, PlayStation 2
Publisher: Sega
Developer: United Game Artists

KEY STAFF:
Tetsuya Mizuguchi
Producer
Takashi Yuda
Director
Yumiko Miyabe
Art director
Takumi Yoshinaga
Story & game design director



IN TERMS OF its place in musical gaming history, Sega's *Space Channel 5* was far from the first modern-era music-rhythm game to make it to market. *PaRappa The Rapper*, *Beatmania* and little-known PlayStation oddity *Fluid* (aka *Depth*) all preceded it by a few years. Nor was *SC5* the first futuristic rhythm-based game – take a bow, *Bust A Move*. In fact, United Game Artists' funky, space-age groove machine is not even the most innovative beat-matching game of its era. That honour would, if we're being honest, go to NanaOn-Sha's *Vib Ribbon*. However, for all of the things *Space Channel 5* is not, it is arguably the most stylish and, for many reasons, the most iconic music-rhythm game of its time.

It's not *Space Channel 5*'s complexity that causes it to resonate to this day. Despite increasingly complex beat-matching patterns as the game progresses, *SC5* is not much more than a flashy spin on the old battery-operated memory game *Simon*. "Up, down, up, down, chu, chu, chu!" belched wave after wave of colourful, gelatinous Morolians, *SC5*'s humorous alien 'threat'. In return, the player was merely tasked with repeating the exact combination of corresponding button presses, in rhythm, via the unflappable, irresistible space reporter Ulala. The pink-haired heroine in the orange miniskirt would eventually shimmy, shake, bop and sashay her way through the game, and it is in her every motion-captured movement that the game crystallises its charm.

Everyone loved Ulala. Sadly, she would only appear in two proper *Space Channel 5* games before, in typical Sega fashion, settling into a life of relative obscurity, the licence languishing in disuse after the disbandment of original developer United Game Artists. Sure, she's made the occasional cameo appearance in other Sega games (over a dozen in fact), but it's been over ten years since *Space Channel 5: Part 2* was released, and there's no *Part 3* on the horizon.

That's no way to treat a lady, or more specifically, waste the unique charms of Ulala and the mythology of the *Space Channel 5* universe. You'd think that over the course of a decade someone continued>.



Space Channel 5 never made it to current-gen systems, but the possibilities of a Kinect-enabled adventure are practically endless.





If *Space Channel 5* taught us anything, it's that no-one parties like a reporter.



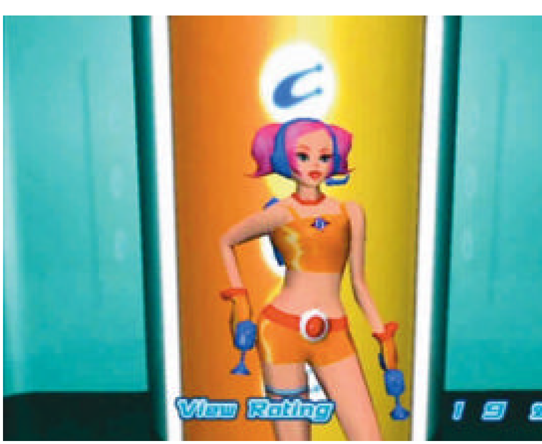






While it looks like fun and games, moving to the beat was vital to the survival of the human race.











Posted by:
ASH

I remember looking at the Japanese version of *Space Channel 5* in a game shop when the assistant told me it was "So Sega". Well I had to buy it. I spent the next few weeks shouting "My name is Jaguar!" (complete with American pronunciation) and "Chu! Chu! Chu!", much to the annoyance of my mates.

Posted by:
MR MARVELLOUS

I loved its style, but the gameplay wasn't as tight as it needed to be for a rhythm game.



Posted by:
BIG MEAN BUNNY

I only ever played the demo of this; however, I fondly remember that demo. It was totally mad to me at the time and used to be one of those games I would put on to show people that were over as a kind of "check out this weird game!"

Posted by:
SHINYMCSHINE

For me I'd already "checked out this weird game" by playing and enjoying *UmJammer Lammy* on the PSone, so *Space Channel 5* just didn't really hold much more than a passing interest in its approach or gameplay.

Posted by:
MERMAN

The word that springs to mind is bonkers. But as a fan of rhythm action, the original is sublime with its kooky style and catchy music. I keep trying to get perfect scores on the Dreamcast but it eludes me.



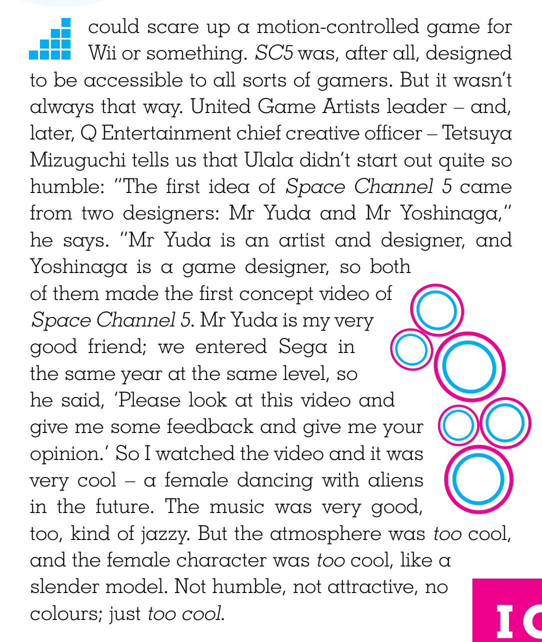




WHAT THEY SAID...

"I think back on all the incredible games I've played on all the various systems out there, and I can't imagine myself having smiled and laughed more than with Space Channel 5"

IGN,
Anoop Gantayat



could scare up a motion-controlled game for Wii or something. *SC5* was, after all, designed to be accessible to all sorts of gamers. But it wasn't always that way. United Game Artists leader – and, later, Q Entertainment chief creative officer – Tetsuya Mizuguchi tells us that Ulala didn't start out quite so humble: "The first idea of *Space Channel 5* came from two designers: Mr Yuda and Mr Yoshinaga," he says. "Mr Yuda is an artist and designer, and Yoshinaga is a game designer, so both of them made the first concept video of *Space Channel 5*. Mr Yuda is my very good friend; we entered Sega in the same year at the same level, so he said, 'Please look at this video and give me some feedback and give me your opinion.' So I watched the video and it was very cool – a female dancing with aliens in the future. The music was very good, too, kind of jazzy. But the atmosphere was *too* cool, and the female character was *too* cool, like a slender model. Not humble, not attractive, no colours; just *too cool*.

"I felt this was boring," Mizuguchi continues, "and there was no game yet. I said we have to change this into something more entertaining. And then Yuda asked me to join the project as a producer, and to make it together. That was the start. I changed the game design and the characters and story, but I really loved the music. It was *Mexican Flyer*, which was the original song they chose."

With this demo video as his launching point, Mizuguchi elaborates, "I wanted to make a new *wow* experience. The game should be very simple, but as you continue to play the game I wanted you to have a big, big emotional chemistry. It's like a musical… musicals are very ridiculous when you think about how people in real life just break out in song, suddenly. But this singing enhances the emotion and drama, so [they're] a very fun thing."

His interest in musicals from the Fifties is certainly apparent, but perhaps the biggest influence on Mizuguchi – not only with *SC5*, but his games in general – might have been the advent of MTV.

"The musical movement of the Fifties and Sixties began to disappear in the Seventies and Eighties. But in the Eighties I watched MTV music videos. I was a junior high school kid. It was so exciting to watch music videos by people like Michael Jackson; it gave me goosebumps. It made me think that music and dance had some power as a big way to entertain people, so I wanted to combine these kinds of elements into a game design. The game could be simple, but as a result of the game we could feel those kinds of goosebumps: laughing, crying, any type of emotional movement and sensation. This was the first vision of *Space Channel 5*."

In terms of his influences, Mizuguchi drew inspiration from the groundbreaking video work of Peter Gabriel and, of course, Michael Jackson, who would eventually appear in both *SC5* games. "I really loved Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer*, and also Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. Totally different types of creative directions, but using this inspiration I did many trials and experiments designing *SC5*. I looked at New Order and Madonna. Many, many new talents and artists emerged on MTV; New Order made *Bizarre Love Triangle*, with [video



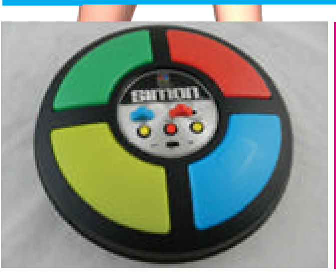
We couldn't really tell you what's going on here; it looks like the greatest rave of all time, though.

I CHANGED THE GAME DESIGN AND THE CHARACTERS, BUT I LOVED THE MUSIC

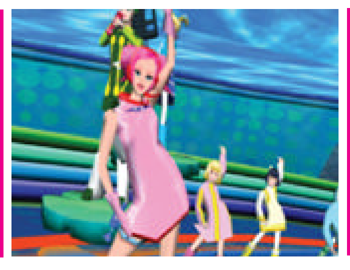


>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Simon > Space Channel 5 > Dance Central



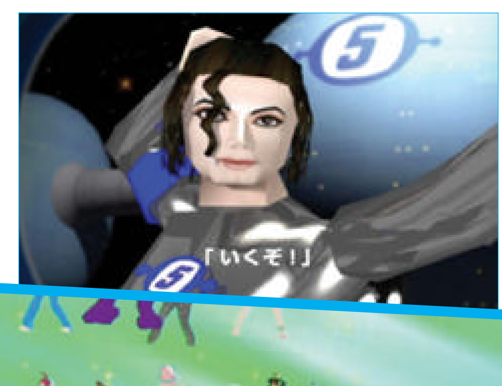
SC5's call-and-response, music-meets-memory gameplay can be traced back to *Simon*, created by the Magnavox Odyssey creator Ralph H Baer.

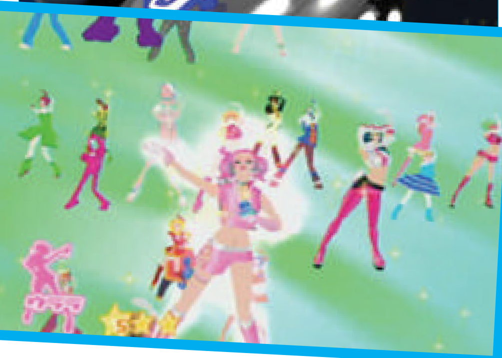


The concept of mimicking on-screen actions with your own body – via the Kinect – hasn't changed much since Ulala's debut.









Not wanting to risk taking itself too seriously, *Space Channel 5* took dancers to some pretty wild locations.

director] Robert Longo. It was a new movement of experimentation; we had a big passion from the music videos of that era. So I started *Space Channel 5* in 1997-1998, maybe 15 years after the first MTV videos. I felt if I made something, I'd need to make a new form of entertainment and experience."

Another spark of inspiration came from another unlikely source: the rhythmic musical *Stomp*. Having witnessed the show's call-and-response audience interaction – something that would become a common theme in Mizuguchi's later works – he realised that this simple interplay could form the basis of *Space Channel 5*'s equally primal game mechanics. He explains: "I watched the musical *Stomp* at the time. One guy would come to the stage, and he'd clap. The audience would just stare back, like 'What?' then he'd clap again and then people would respond with a clap. When I saw that, I thought we could use that super call and response in *Space Channel 5*. So this game mechanism uses just two things: one is memory, the other thing is rhythm. Mixing rhythm and memory, we can make any type of game – it's simple. So [mimicking a typical segment of *SC5*] 'Up, down, chu!' We discovered that very basic scheme of game design. Then I made a very simple game editor and we did experiments, and that became our first playable demo. I wanted something very simple, minimal, so I could see if this basic design was fun, or good or bad. I played this basic game design and I thought, 'Oh, this is fun.' Then we added characters on the screen, and that was the start."



TETSUYA MIZUGUCHI
Producer

But as development of what would become *Space Channel 5* began in earnest, the game still wasn't where he thought it should be. The call-and-response mechanics were there, but Mizuguchi felt his team needed to think outside of the box. Like, *really* outside of the box. "In the beginning of the production," he says, "I had a struggle with the staff. The designers, including Yuda, wanted to make *SC5* with a much more cool atmosphere. But I wanted to make it much more entertaining, and funny and crazy – not cool. I wanted to change the atmosphere of the team, so I started a workshop." What sort of workshop does a producer assemble for a staff of videogame designers? "I invited a pantomime artist," says Mizuguchi, "and every week we had a two- or three-hour workshop with all staff members. Not just pantomime, but we explored how we could make people laugh just through action and reaction. We learned many things in that workshop."

One exercise found Mizuguchi himself involved, running at an invisible door, breaking *through* that door, and then stopping and posing as if frozen in time. "I was the first one who had to do it," he admits. "In front of all the team I had to do this. It was so high-pressure, and I felt so shy. But I needed to do it; I was the producer. I had to run, break the invisible door, stop and pose, and shout 'Space Channel 5!' It's so tough to make people laugh; just saying 'Space Channel 5!' wasn't so funny." The solution, as it turns out, wasn't so far away. "The teacher said, 'Okay, Mizuguchi-san, that was very good. But this time say "Space Channel 5!" and then please, please hold the pose. Keep your face in the

The King Of Pop pops in for a song and dance

ONE OF the most surprising cameo appearances in a videogame ever – besides Pepsiman in *Fighting Vipers* (Japanese version) – has got to be Michael Jackson's alter ego, Space Michael, appearing in the midst of the first *Space Channel 5*. Mizuguchi, who had met the King Of Pop earlier during his many visits to Sega HQ, told us that Michael Jackson saw a near-final build of *SC5* about a month before production and decided he wanted to be part of the game. Thinking that Jackson would want the starring role, Mizuguchi, while excited, knew that there was no way to put him in the game in time, at least on that level. "So at first I wanted to gently turn down his proposal, and I was thinking of excuses; 'How can we tell Michael Jackson no?' I really wanted to put him in the game, but I had no time. I thought maybe I could do just one thing, and that was to replace one of the characters in the game with Michael Jackson." As it turns out, this is exactly what happened, which is why Space Michael is one of the later surprises in the game. The Gloved One would later reprise his role in *SC5: Part 2*, expanded to the point where he even made it onto the box cover. Unfortunately, the timing of Michael Jackson's legal battles in court caused Sega to cancel the UK release of the game. However, it is now available as a digital download.

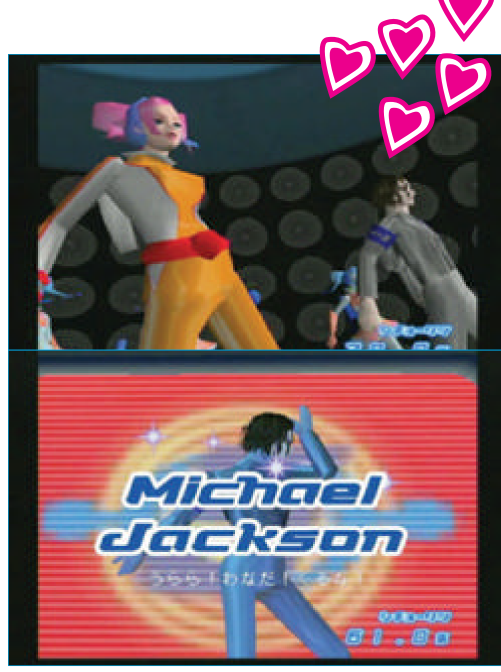


Clearly nobody informed Ulala that dance and gunplay never mix. The addition of a pop-hero certainly helps any situation, though.

same place, just freeze, for 15 seconds.' So I did it again, and after the first five seconds some staff started giggling. After ten seconds everybody was laughing out loud. This was a very important discovery."

Space Channel 5 veterans will recognise the fruits of all this unorthodox labour, in the moments where Ulala displays a penchant for holding her pose for a few moments at the end of any successful encounter in the game. With the team on the right path, Mizuguchi was able to focus on things like hunting down the licensor for the game's theme song, *Mexican Flyer*, which proved tricky because both the song and its publisher were equally obscure. Yuda, the game designer, had discovered the song on a compilation CD. It had never appeared in a film, game or commercial anywhere else prior to its use in *SC5*, but once they had the song secured they were able to build a visual style to match its horn-driven, over-the-top, swingin' big band sound. While her character design seems so natural and breezy, Ulala herself went through five or six major revisions before UGA's character designer, Yumiko Miyabe, ran into Mizuguchi's office one morning, confident that she had nailed Ulala's character design.

"We settled on the character design of Ulala almost near the end of the production," Mizuguchi reveals. "I remember the art director, Miyabe, came to my desk in the morning and was screaming, 'We made a baby!' She was like a mother, because she had designed the main character, so I went to her desk and looked at Ulala. At that moment I felt like we created a new life. We had many processes that we went through, of action, motion and movement. We did a lot of motion capture, so when I was directing the attitude of the main character, I was really putting the soul into Ulala."



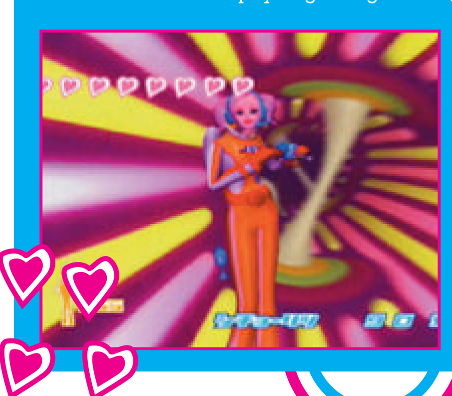
Michael Jackson was a big influence on Tetsuya Mizuguchi: through music videos like *Thriller* he learnt of the power music has to entertain.

ANOTHER ELEMENT OF the game that would become – at least in the Japanese version – integral to Ulala's 'soul' was her voice. Instead of hiring a famous voice actress to handle vocal duties, UGA needed someone internal, for ease of access, to be on-call at all hours for this particularly demanding vocal role. So they chose one of the *Space Channel 5* staff to perform the role of Ulala. The reason was obvious, Mizuguchi reasons: "We needed to be able to do the voice acting ourselves, because the tone of the voice would have a big effect on the impact of the game design. It affects the sense of reward. We had to do a lot of trial and error, many times. So for important characters we had to handle the roles by ourselves." Regarding the novice actress in question, "All the time she cried in the studio, because my requirements were so tough. I needed a cheerful, high-tension style, but she couldn't do that naturally, and I'd always say, 'It's not enough, it's not enough. Do it again.'"

Fortunately, the team member who supplied Ulala's voice was able to pull herself together and resume the role for *Space Channel 5: Part 2*, which discarded the pre-rendered FMV backgrounds of the first game and replaced them with fully polygonal 3D graphics. Mizuguchi tells us that he wanted more freedom in the second game, and by this time they had learned how to get more out of the Dreamcast hardware, which made FMV backgrounds unnecessary. The development of *SC5: Part 2* also took place right around the time that Sega had abandoned the hardware wars and gone multiplatform as a software-only publisher. *Rez* was UGA's first PlayStation 2 production, and *SC5: Part 2*, while primarily developed for Dreamcast, was

Greed is in the heart

WHILE MOST of the gaming world was fawning over Ulala in 1999, there was most certainly someone who wasn't so enamoured: Lady Miss Kier of the early Nineties dance group Deee-Lite. Kier, a club kid from NYC's late-Eighties nightclub scene turned momentary pop star, decided that Sega had appropriated her likeness without consent or compensation. She claimed that the game publisher had approached her about using her likeness, but used it anyway after she turned them down. Whether it was actually A) common sense, B) a lack of evidence to support her case, or C) merely the Sixties calling and saying, "We want our style back!" that tilted the case in Sega's favour, Kier ultimately lost the suit. Compounding the legal defeat was the fact that she was court-ordered to pay Sega's legal costs, to the tune of just over $600,000.







■ *Space Channel Five's* sequel was more of the same, but featured more complex tunes and trickier dance routines.

■ Whoever said you had to be appropriately dressed to save the world was just plain wrong.

■ Ulala had a whole host of dancing partners, though none was quite as iconic as the bubblegum pink-haired heroine.

I LOOKED AT ULALA… AT THAT MOMENT I FELT LIKE WE HAD CREATED A NEW LIFE

its second game developed for former-rival Sony's dominant game console.

■■■ UGA ALSO PORTED the original *Space Channel 5* to PS2, where it still commands a high price in Japan due to its relative rarity. Unlike the disappointing sales that plagued *Rez*, *Space Channel 5: Part 2* on PS2 was actually fairly successful at the time, reportedly selling over 150,000 copies in Japan alone. The sequel featured numerous improvements over the original, introducing more sophisticated game mechanics, more characters, a longer story mode and a higher degree of difficulty. While the original release of *SC5: Part 2* never made it to the UK due to Michael Jackson's high-profile legal troubles (he was a major character in the sequel), Sega recently released an HD remake of *Space Channel 5: Part 2* as a digital download on all major platforms. So, now's your chance.

Despite the short lifespan of the series, Ulala proved to be a very popular videogame character at the time, famously voiced in the Western release by singer Apollo Smile. She appeared in promo videos for the 2000 MTV Video Music Awards, and almost earned her own animated TV show – also on MTV – but it stalled in the planning stages. Ulala and a Morolian came installed on over 10 million J-Phones (Japan only, naturally), alerting you to incoming calls and then polling you afterwards to measure your mood. The Morolian character also appeared in UGA's *Rez* as an unlockable character, but besides these cameo appearances, that's been it for *Space Channel 5*. This, of course, leads us to the question: what would Mizuguchi do if he were able to make a third, proper *Space Channel 5* game?

It is a little-known fact that, during his time at Q Entertainment, he was occasionally in discussions with Sega to revisit the series for current-gen platforms. "As you know, we did *Rez HD* with Q Entertainment, and I made a very personal *Rez* sequel with *Child Of Eden*," he reminisces. "So I'm always thinking about a new *Space Channel 5*, even now. I always think of new ways to make *SC5*, using a tablet, or on smartphones – a tapping experience. We could put it on consoles, in hi-res, using high-polygon counts. We could produce so many, *many* people to save and join you while dancing. It must be fun to connect people using social elements. There are many types of possibilities."

Although he has since retired his role as CCO to focus on other evolutions in technology and entertainment, the dream clearly isn't over, having gotten that long-awaited *Rez* sequel out of his system and, perhaps in the future, the possibility of a third *SC5*. "So if I have a chance to make a *Space Channel 5* sequel, I want to use a new way to make the game. For example, making it with many people in the world. I mean making the game with *SC5* fans; we can connect now using social platforms, so let's make *SC5 together*. I could offer some instructions and say, 'Please send me new kinds of characters and new kinds of scenarios, and let's make a new *Space Channel 5*.' Maybe this is the new way to make games, a new style of engagement. A game like *Space Channel 5* makes this possible."

Always looking towards the future of entertainment, he asks us, "Is it possible to make a 'cloud' production?" and laughs. As history suggests, with Mizuguchi in the driver's seat, anything is possible.

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



CRAZY TAXI






ORIGINAL RELEASE BOARD: **Sega Naomi hardware** YEAR: **1999**
PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Hitmaker**

SYSTEM FAILURE FORMAT: **Game Boy Advance** YEAR: **2003**
PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Graphic State**

AS WE entered the 32-bit generation and home formats started approaching coin-op quality, conversion catastrophes became far less common. Handhelds however still had some catching up to do. When a successful game saw release, the prospect of a horrible rendition of it being squeezed onto a portable machine with no chance of doing it justice was never far away.

Sometimes they would be conversions in the loosest sense of the word – looking nothing like the original game they were based upon and instead seeing developers convert the 'essence' of the game into a new handheld-friendly body (top-down *Carmageddon* on Game Boy for instance, or the side-scrolling *Tomb Raider* on Game Boy Color). Other times though, a studio would dare to have a stab at trying to recreate a coin-op on smaller screens to the letter, and in most cases that letter was P, for pointless.

It's still startling that there was a 3D version of *Crazy Taxi* released for the GBA. Though it was given the tweaked title of *Crazy Taxi: Catch A Ride* and wasn't an exact replication of Sega's arcade smash, it was essentially a handheld port of the popular Dreamcast conversion, and as such included two cities to tear around and nine minigames taken from its popular Crazy Box mode.

Though it's hard not to applaud Graphic State's ambition, *Catch A Ride* feels like a conversion job destined to disappoint. Pushing the graphical limitations of the GBA to near breaking point, its ugly head-on collision of polygons and sprites were a shadow of the coin-op classic.

The excitement and exhilaration *Crazy Taxi* is famed for was also completely lost in this port, and this is on account of bland and empty-feeling streets, fiddly controls and frustrating gameplay. The slow speed, choppy frame rate and shallow draw distance make seeing and reacting to the road, cars and pedestrians a real challenge, while the handheld's D-pad controls made it difficult to weave confidently through traffic, round corners quickly or bring your cab to a stop with any sort of style or accuracy.

The brilliance of *Crazy Taxi* comes from its speed, inviting graphics, over-the-top yet responsive handling and entertaining city. Sadly, this port fails to deliver on all counts. In fact, the craziest thing about this conversion is that it was even attempted.

THE BREAKDOWN

1 No one could expect the GBA to deliver a flawless conversion of *Crazy Taxi*, and points must surely go to the developer for squeezing not only two cities into its port but also a selection of Crazy Box minigames, however, graphically this conversion looks like one of Sega's Super-Scaler games from the Eighties.



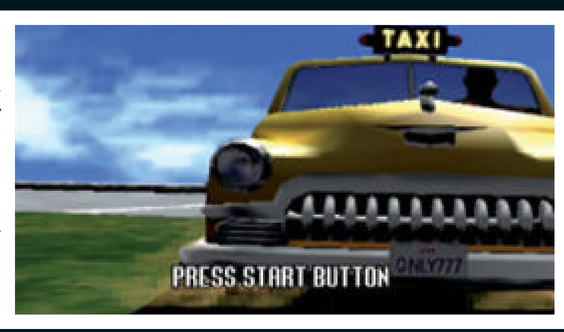


2 The thing this conversion does get right is its music and FX. Even without memorable tracks from The Offspring and Bad Religion, the new audio sounds in-keeping with the music from the coin-op. The voice samples are also clear and crisp, although the variety of customer chatter is shallower than the game's draw distance.



3 Like the home console versions, the GBA conversion featured two cities. They start off feeling like their counterparts, but quickly take a u-turn into Dullville, a place of unexciting destinations, and where most of the streets all look the same. Suffice to say, it doesn't make for a very interesting or faithful take on the original arcade hit.

■ Sega patented the core gameplay of *Crazy Taxi* and used it to file a lawsuit over the similar gameplay found in *The Simpsons: Road Rage*. The case was settled out of court.



WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Dreamcast** Year: **2000**
Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Hitmaker**

■ ONE OF the best coin-op conversions of all time, the Dreamcast port of *Crazy Taxi* is also one of the best games on the system. Not only did Sega recreate the original city down to a tee, it also added a second city and tasty buffet of minigame challenges to complete.

THE COMPLETE HI

YEAR IN 20

IN 2002 consoles continued to rule the gaming world, with Nintendo, Sony and newcomer Microsoft all battling for dominance.

Nintendo's Game Boy Advance was going great guns, mainly due to the fact that it had no real handheld competitor and a host of great games available. It boasted a string of decent ports ranging from *Doom* and *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* to *Street Fighter Alpha 3* and various *Mario* updates, as well as original offerings in the form of *Metroid Fusion*, *Castlevania: Harmony Of Dissonance*, *Densetsu No Stafy* and Sonic Team's *Sonic Advance*. Huge third-party support and a solid install base saw it easily destroy Namco Bandai's SwanCrystal, it's only real competitor (in Japan at least), and it continued to dominate until it was discontinued in 2008.

Nintendo's GameCube, on the other hand, was slowly building momentum, thanks to some great gems that were released throughout 2002, which also marked its European debut. It was a particularly good year for survival horror enthusiasts thanks to the arrival of both *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* and a remake of the original *Resident Evil*.

Eternal Darkness, which had first been planned for the N64, was a staggering epic from the now defunct Silicon Knights, which allowed you to control a rich cast of different characters from various points in history and a unique sanity system. Capcom's remake was equally impressive thanks to stunning visuals, new puzzle arrangements and scary new monsters in the form of Crimson Zombies. It remains the best remake we've ever played.

Other GameCube highlights included *Super Mario Sunshine*, *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, *Metroid Prime* and *Star Fox Adventures*. *Star Fox* was particularly interesting. Microsoft announced in September after months of speculation that it had bought Rare from Nintendo for an amazing $375 million, and *Star Fox Adventures* marked the end of a close relationship with Nintendo that had first started with the release of *Slalom* in 1987.

Microsoft's huge offer on Rare was further

■ Rumours had been circulating that Microsoft was preparing to buy Sega, but the Japanese company pulled out at the last minute. This might explain why so many Sega exclusives were released on the Xbox.

■ *Castlevania: Harmony Of Dissonance* was an excellent *Castlevania* game with an additional castle to explore, just like *Symphony Of The Night*.

■ Microsoft's Xbox launched in Europe on 14 March. It was well supported with an impressive launch line-up that ranged from *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Dead Or Alive 3*, to *Rallisport Challenge* and *Project Gotham Racing*.

STORY OF GAMES

proof that the company meant business in the console market, and while Rare's first game for the system, *Grabbed By The Ghoulies*, wouldn't appear until a year later, there were still plenty of solid games available. *Rallisport Challenge* was a superbly slick racing game that accompanied the Xbox's European launch on 14 March. Other launch highlights included *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee* and *Amped: Freestyle Snowboarding*. Notable releases throughout the year for Microsoft's console included *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*, *Unreal Championship* (which would be one of the first games to support Xbox Live) and the excellent *WipEout* clone *Quantum Redshift*.

The Xbox also proved a new home for Sega, with the developer releasing no less than 16 games on the Xbox throughout the year. The underrated *GunValkyrie* had started off as a Dreamcast game, while there were a number of sequels including *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth*, *The House Of The Dead III*, *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *Jet Set Radio Future* and *Shenmue II*, which was published by Microsoft but still failed to find a suitable audience, despite the fact Americans had never had access to the original Dreamcast game.

REVIEW 02

If Nintendo and Microsoft's consoles were making solid groundwork, they were still struggling against Sony's PlayStation 2. It boasted a range of exclusives, ranging from *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* to the excellent *Kingdom Hearts*. It also received short-term exclusives in the form of *Burnout 2: Point Of Impact*, which greatly improved on Criterion's original racer, and the rather splendid FPS *TimeSplitters 2*.

And then of course there was the PC which continued to offer deep gaming experiences that couldn't be found on home consoles. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* was the largest game in the series to date, while *Neverwinter Nights* saw BioWare once again returning to the world of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Other highlights included DICE's superb *Battlefield 1942*, Ensemble Studios epic RTS *Age Of Mythology* and the greatly underrated *Dungeon Siege*.

We'll finish off this look at 2002 by mentioning that it also marked the debut of the very magazine you're reading right now. Our first issue launched in December and featured Splinter Cell on its cover. We also reviewed *GTA: Vice City* (9/10), *Unreal Championship* (8/10) and the aforementioned *Splinter Cell* (8/10) among many others. We've been covering the history of videogames ever since, making this the perfect place to end our extensive documentation of gaming's rich and varied history.

■ *Star Fox Adventure* would be the last Rare game to appear on a Nintendo home console. Unlike past games in the series, it was an enjoyable *Zelda* clone and had once been planned to appear on the N64.





■ The original *Burnout* made it onto GameCube and Xbox in early 2002; the superior sequel arrived on PlayStation 2 only months later.



■ **games™** was released in December 2002. Sam Fisher would become something of a poster boy, appearing on the cover several times over the next ten years.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Denis Dyack

■ He's better known nowadays for being controversial and outspoken, but Dyack was a big deal in 2002. Acting as director and producer of *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, he proved that there were still plenty of great ideas to be dragged from the bloating corpse of survival horror. The sanity effects – which ranged from tricking you into thinking your save had been deleted to having a fly crawl across the screen – were truly innovative, while the rich storyline and varied range of characters gave it an epic scope few other games could match. Sadly Silicon Knights is a shadow of its former self and currently has only a handful of employees.



EXTENDED PLAY: **2002**

METROID PRIME

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review… This month, we reveal how Retro Studio turned a potential car crash into our first 10/10

IT'S AMAZING THAT *Metroid Prime* turned out as well as it did. More so when you consider its rocky history. Its genesis started in 1999 when the newly formed Retro Studios began working on four new games for Nintendo. After a visit from Miyamoto in 2000, he stated his disappointment with the games the team were working on and suggested a new *Metroid* game after seeing a first-person engine they had created.

Within the space of a year, the four games – including a RPG called *Raven Blade* – were all cancelled so Retro could put all its time into *Metroid*. There were still problems, however, with Retro and Nintendo constantly clashing over Miyamoto's vision for the new game. The team worked doggedly and after a nine month period, which consisted of many of the studio members working 80+ hours a week, *Metroid Prime* was completed.

The end result was quite simply astonishing. Despite the fact that it was viewed in the first-person perspective, *Metroid Prime* had little in common with other shooters. The ability to lock onto enemies made it far easier than its peers, meaning that it wasn't the all-out shoot fest that many people were expecting. Instead, *Metroid Prime* had a slower pace with a big focus on exploring your incredible surroundings. From the dusty, mysterious pillars of the Chozo Ruins to the icy snow-covered mountains of the Phendrana Drifts, *Metroid Prime* looked amazing and was filled with exotic locations that were begging to be discovered.

THE BEST TRANSITION FROM 2D TO 3D IN RECENT GAMING MEMORY

This was further emphasised by the excellent scanning system that allowed Samus to lock on to specific items with her helmet and learn new information, slowly unlocking the back story of the mysterious planet she found herself on.

While the majority of *Metroid Prime* was played out in the first-person perspective, things would change to third-person whenever Samus used her Morph Ball. Realising the limitations of its engine (one of the reasons why *Prime* was changed late in the day from a third-person action game), Retro kept the transformations relatively straightforward, ensuring that the game's superb atmosphere was never lost. It also used familiar *Metroid* mechanics, such as opening up previously unreachable sections as you earned new weapons.

And that's the real beauty of *Metroid Prime*; it stays faithful to the original franchise, while taking it in a fresh, new and exciting direction. It's also boasts the best transition from 2D to 3D in recent gaming memory. Little wonder that it spawned two sequels and became **games**™'s first bona-fide ten.



The environments in *Metroid Prime* may be predictable, but they nevertheless look stunning.

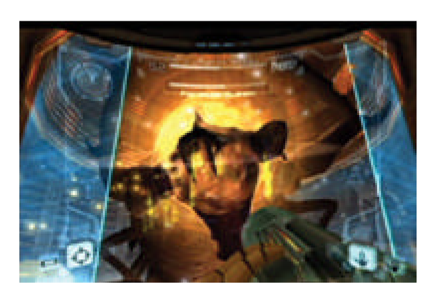


The Space Pirates of past games make a popular return, often proving a huge challenge to take down.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ *Metroid Prime* was a huge success for Nintendo and several sequels quickly followed. *Metroid Fusion* on Game Boy Advance was first and featured the neat ability to link-up to *Metroid Prime*. *Prime's* first true sequel, *Metroid Prime: Echoes* arrived on GameCube in 2004 and featured a greatly trumpeted, but rather weak, multiplayer mode. *Metroid: Zero Mission*, an enhanced update of the original NES game appeared on GBA in the same year. This was followed in 2005 by *Metroid Prime Pinball* on DS, while a stronger attempt to make a proper multiplayer arrived in 2006 in the form of *Metroid Prime Hunters*, which was also released on DS. *Metroid Prime: Corruption*, the final part of the trilogy, appeared on the Wii in 2007 and was followed by *Metroid: Other M*, a slick fast-paced combat game by Ninja Gaiden that proved the Wii could be just as hardcore as its rivals. As of this time, no *Metroid* games have been currently announced for Wii U.



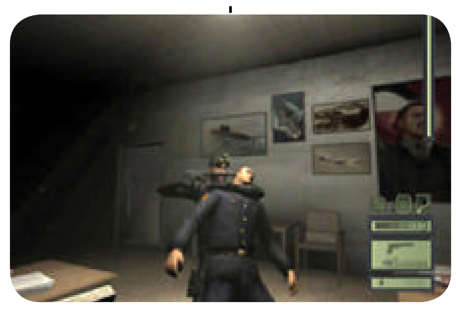
ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER



■ ZELDA'S FAN BASE was dismayed when Nintendo revealed Link's new cel-shaded look in 2001. Nintendo's gamble worked though, as the distinctive style gave Link and the other characters huge amounts of personality, delivering an emotion that the series has never regained. Little wonder then that a new HD version has been announced for Wii U.

TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL



■ ORIGINALLY DEBUTING ON Microsoft's Xbox, *Splinter Cell* was Ubisoft's more realistic answer to Konami's nutty *Metal Gear Solid* franchise. It was a solid debut and, while there was often a little too much emphasis on being in the right place at the right time, it delivered a solid alternative to Snake's sneaking shenanigans.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: VICE CITY



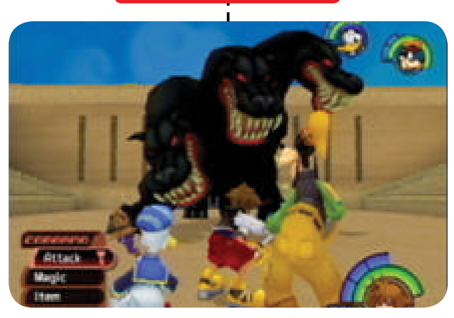
■ AFTER BLOWING AWAY gamers with *Grand Theft Auto III*, Rockstar North returned a year later with an arguably slicker sequel. A better story, terrific voice acting, more structured missions and the ability to ride bikes were all married to a stunning Miami backdrop and heaps of Eighties nostalgia.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS



■ BIOWARE HAD A natural affinity for the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe, effortlessly churning out hit after hit. Its third *D&D* release was arguably its most ambitious, featuring extensive online play that allowed Dungeon Masters to run their own games. It was supported by three expansions that further added to an already deep game.

KINGDOM HEARTS



■ SQUARE'S MARRYING OF the *Final Fantasy's* universe with Disney's sounded like a recipe for disaster; the end result was anything but. While some characters got more screen times than others, the variation of the worlds, rousing score and real-time combat proved to be as delightful a fusion as the actual franchises were.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: Sega Saturn
YEAR: 1996
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Warp, Inc.
EXPECT TO PAY: £40

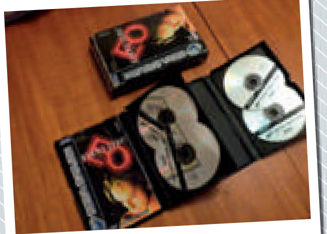


EXHIBIT A: *Enemy Zero* was a twilight PAL release for the Sega Saturn. This quirky survival horror also stretched across 4 CDs.



EXHIBIT B: Sega Saturn' cardboard-coated boxes weren't the sturdiest or most robust game cases, so finding a copy in mint condition is difficult.



EXHIBIT C: There are three games in the *D* series. Warp followed up *Enemy Zero* in 1999 with *D2* on Dreamcast. It was the studio's last official game.

ENEMY ZERO

Screenshots provided by www.hardcoregaming101.net

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

DIRECTED BY the late musician and maverick game designer Kenji Eno, *Enemy Zero* is the sequel to the cult survival-horror puzzler *D*, the first game from Eno's studio Warp, Inc. While the horror series enjoyed popularity in Japan, it didn't strike as loud a chord in the west. A late release for the Sega Saturn in Europe – and one that failed to endear itself to many critics and gamers – *Enemy Zero* has now become something of a cult game among collectors of the console. Though standard copies are quite rare and will typically cost around £40, the fanatical Warp nut with extremely deep pockets will no doubt want to get their hands on the much rarer Japanese pre-order version. Packaged in a large wooden crate, it contained a mass of promotional merchandise that including a T-shirt, artwork book, embroidered towel and a replica gun from the game. Costing 200,000 yen (around $2,500), only 20 of these special editions were ever made, and Kenji Eno was even said to have turned up on the doorsteps of buyers to deliver each one in person. Surely the most bizarre videogame pre-order in history, it's just another example of the quirkiness of the studio.





Worth Playing?

ANYONE FAMILIAR with Warp will know that the studio is recognised for making original titles that seem to, well, warp game conventions. Of the four Warp titles that actually made it to the west, *Enemy Zero* is probably the most polarising among gamers. This is chiefly on account of its numerous design quirks; from having to reload weapons frequently and charge up shots before firing, to the slow movement of the game's protagonist, it's a game that requires patience and perseverance. Taking place on a spaceship besieged by invisible aliens that are gradually killing off its crew, players had to rely on sound cues in order to gauge the whereabouts of enemies, with the sound of radio static becoming faster and altering in pitch to help direct players to their location. *Enemy Zero* also gave players a limited number of save slots to complete the game with, and this added to the feeling of tension, vulnerability and uncertainty its design seems to be wholly built around projecting. In some ways then, *Enemy Zero* can be viewed as one of the most cleverly constructed survival horror games there is, while to some people it will probably just be regarded as a horror to play.



FACT!

Team Ico head Fumito Ueda is a former Warp alumnus and worked as a CGI animator on *Enemy Zero*.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Dave Webster**
Occupation: **Research Fellow**

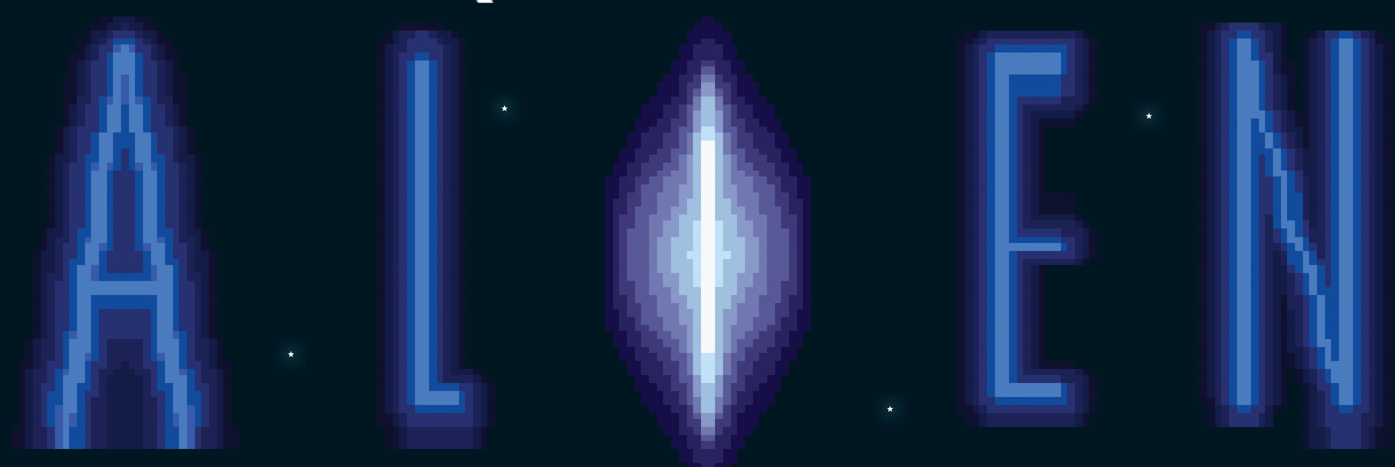
What is it about the Sega Saturn, and *Enemy Zero* in particular, that is attractive to you?
The thing that attracts me to the Saturn is that it has become such a niche console and has some great specialist games that have fallen out of the collective memory. *Enemy Zero* is a great example as it is a slow-burner space-horror game with a distinctly Japanese feel. The Saturn has an incredibly rich library of Japanese-only games too, which can be an acquired taste, but rewarding.

Please tell us how/where you found your copy of *Enemy Zero*. What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
I bought it in 1998 from a long gone independent game shop called Whizz Kids in Barnsley for around £20. The game, manual and all four CDs are in fairly good condition, with a little bit of tape on the outer cardboard cover which was there when I bought it. You really do get a lot of stuff in the box, which makes it even more collectable.

Do you actually play *Enemy Zero* and, if so, what do you think of it?
I have to admit that I haven't played it for a few years, but it's one of those really rewarding experiences that you need to invest the time in accompaniment with a pen and a notepad. The game has a number of quirks, such as the invisible enemy and sound cues, [and] – while helping the space horror feel – I can see how a lot of people may be initially put off by this.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game, or is it yours for life?
At the moment, no. It's one of those story-based adventure games like *Snatcher* that are always fun to replay every few years.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...



Whether it's the disturbing serenity of the Ridley Scott original or the sledgehammer subtlety of the James Cameron sequel, every sci-fi fan has a favourite Alien film. But when you look back at 30 years of Xenomorph-themed videogames, it's hard to pick one that combines silicon processing power with silicon-based nightmares for maximum effect. **games™** investigates…



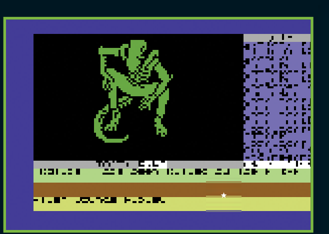
THE FANFARE SURROUNDING the release of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* was immense. And then when the game finally arrived… Yes it built upon the legacy of *Aliens* – arguably one of the greatest action films in cinematic history – but it did it terribly, delivering a game that had fans baying for blood. Sure we got to go claw-to-Pulse Rifle with a range of new Alien variants that included the ram-like Crusher and the suicidal Boiler, but the final game was still tinged with disappointment. But in terms of expanding the Alien universe, just how much of a role have videogames played in Xenomorph history?

Quite a lot, it turns out, as with over 30 licensed *Alien* games to date, gamers have been tackling the savage Alien Warriors and their extended family since 1982. And although this guide is primarily focused on the *Alien* franchise, it'd be sacrilege not to include the games where the Yautja (ie Predators) have gone up against HR Giger's original space horror. So build yourself a fire and get ready to sing a couple of songs as we tackle the *Alien* game universe in short, controlled bursts.



1982: ALIEN (Atari 2600)

Released three years after the film, the first official *Alien* game was one of the better *Pac-Man* impersonators on the Atari 2600. Instead of ghosts and pellets, you had to avoid three patrolling Xenomorphs while destroying Alien eggs – and in a nod to the classic Power Pill, touching a pulsar would temporarily turn the tables as the hunted became the hunter. Also, in a *Frogger*-like bonus screen, you could run past a swarm of Aliens to increase your score with a special item.



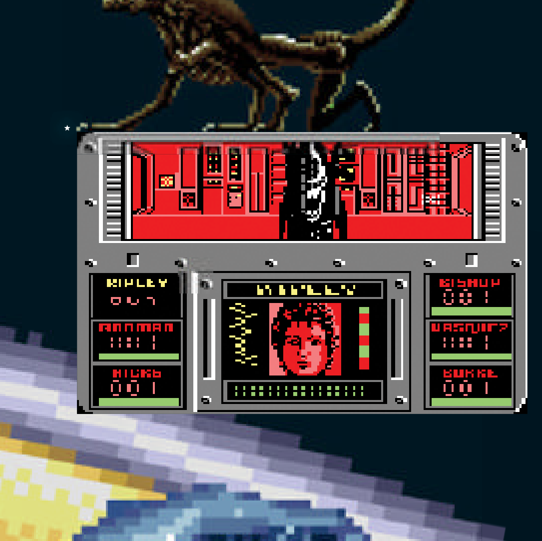
1984: ALIEN (Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum)

This was much more faithful to the film than its Atari 2600 predecessor. Set after the infamous Chestburster incident, it tasked you with destroying the Alien while keeping your crew alive. There were 35 rooms to search across three decks, and you could kill the Alien by either blasting it into space through the airlock or activating the self-destruct sequence before fleeing the ship. You could also order a crew member to catch Jones the cat to save it.



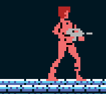
1986: ALIENS: THE COMPUTER GAME (Amstrad CPC, Apple II, Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum)

There were two *Aliens* games released with the 'Computer Game' tagline – one published by Activision and the other by Electric Dreams Software. Activision was first off the starting line with a collection of six mini-games that tapped into different scenes from the film. You had to fly the marines safely to LV-426, search the complex for Newt before time ran out, climb through a series of ventilation shafts without losing your head, and even pilot the iconic loader before facing off against the Alien Queen. It's also the first Xenomorph game to be coded by a team rather than a solo programmer.



1987: ALIENS: THE COMPUTER GAME (Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64, MSX, ZX Spectrum)

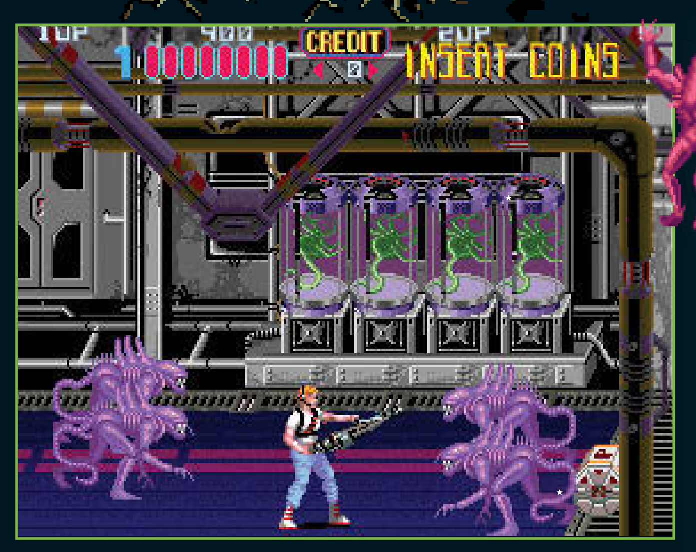
While the Activision game branched out to various genres, Electronic Dreams' instalment focused primarily on the first-person action. You controlled six characters: Ripley, Gorman, Hicks, Bishop, Vasquez and Burke. Each was armed with a M56 Smartgun, and you had to guide them through a complex made up of 255 rooms while searching for the Alien Queen. A headshot killed an Alien Warrior instantly, but if one of your characters was captured while you were controlling someone else, you had to rescue them quickly or lose them for good. This game also made you wary of acid blood for the first time.



1987: ALIENS: ALIEN 2 (MSX)

A few months before Square struck gold with *Final Fantasy*, it released a *Contra*-style game that was based on *Aliens*. Inelegantly titled *Aliens: Alien 2* (which we suppose makes a certain degree of sense), this run-and-gunner placed you in charge of Ripley as she mowed down Facehuggers, some imposing Alien Warriors and the odd venomous snake. You started out in an outdoor environment armed with a basic shotgun, but before long you were hotfooting it through shadowy complexes with the M41A Pulse Rifle and a stockpile of M40 grenades. Not the best *Alien* game, but a solid showing for the humble MSX.





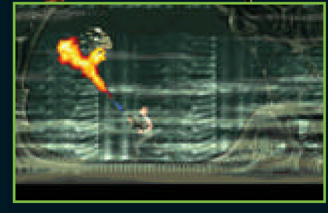
1990: ALIENS (Arcade)

One of the most overlooked titles here is the first *Aliens* arcade game by Konami. It's slightly unusual in that it plays like a *Final Fight*-style beat-'em-up but with ranged weapons like flamethrowers and missile launchers being your only form of attack. While most *Alien* games had kept to the established bestiary up to this point, Konami took poetic licence to a whole new level with Alien hybrids that sported wings, shot lightning and bounced around like armoured wrecking-balls. Still, this is one of the more polished *Alien* games. You even get to ride aboard the M577 APC!



1992: ALIEN 3 (Amiga, Commodore 64, Game Gear Master System, Mega Drive)

Despite its reputation as the weakest film of the quadrilogy, *Alien 3* was fashioned into a game for myriad platforms. Most of these were handled by Probe Software and – as this was the early Nineties – the only logical course of action was to make an action game with shooter and platforming elements. The level structure differs with each platform, but each version has you rescuing prisoners against the clock while gunning down the Xenomorph menace. The Mega Drive, Amiga and Commodore 64 versions were also notable for featuring an on-screen motion tracker.



1993: ALIEN 3 (NES, SNES)

After taking care of Sega's trio, Probe Software struck a publishing deal with LJN so that Nintendo could finally get in on the *Alien* phenomenon. The NES version played very similarly to the earlier games, but with extra levels. If you want the definitive *Alien 3* experience, however, look no further than the Super Nintendo. Not only is this version the most visually impressive, it expanded the prisoner-rescuing routine with objectives that range from smashing Alien eggs to welding blast doors and repairing fuse boxes. You could even upgrade the standard flamethrower with special fuel for quicker kills.



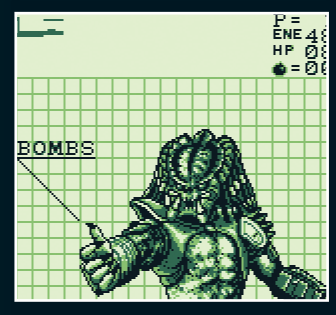
1993: ALIEN 3 (Game Boy)

Development duties for the Game Boy version of *Alien 3* fell to Bits Studios, a team of portable specialists that had previously worked on handheld games like *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. Rather than mimic Probe Software's side-on approach, it chose a top-down perspective that allowed players to explore the Fury 161 prison on foot; and just like all the other *Alien 3* games, this one ignored the fact that the film only featured one fully developed Xenomorph. Survival was a key feature of the game, and you eventually came face-to-face with an Alien Queen in the prison's central furnace.



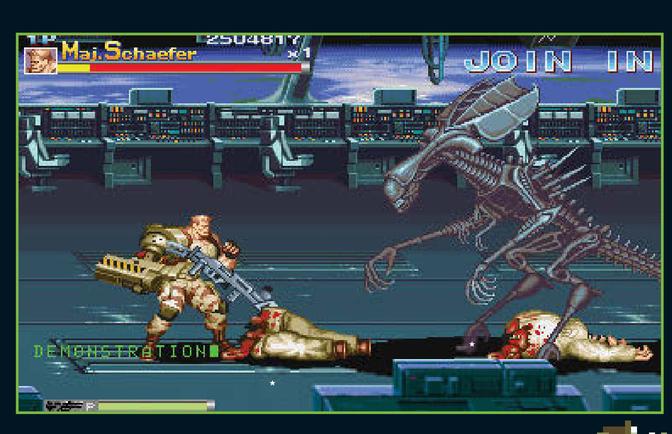
1993: ALIEN VS PREDATOR (SNES)

It's often assumed that the appearance of the Alien skull in *Predator 2* was the catalyst for the sci-fi crossover, but in truth, Dark Horse Comics ran the first *Alien Vs Predator* story back in 1989. The first gaming encounter between the two species was developed by a Japanese studio called Jorudan for the SNES. It took the form of a traditional beat-'em-up where the player could use the Yautja's arsenal of wrist blades, active camouflage, Combi Sticks, Smart Discs and even the classic Plasma Caster to butcher the Alien forces. Unfortunately, it was let down by poor enemy AI and lacklustre gameplay.



1993: ALIEN VS PREDATOR: THE LAST OF HIS CLAN (Game Boy)

Following the release of the SNES game, Japanese developer ASK was given the opportunity to make an *AVP* game for the Game Boy. After a Predator clan is wiped out after underestimating the Alien presence on Alpha Centauri 3, it falls to the sole survivor to slay the Alien Queen and restore his clan's honour. One of the more interesting things about the game was how you could use active camouflage to sneak past the Xenomorphs. This is a contradiction to the later games where the cloaking effect only works on humans.



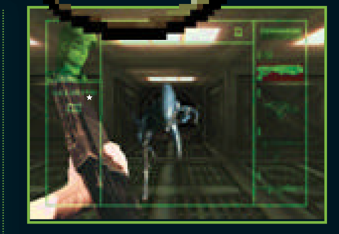
1994: ALIEN VS PREDATOR (Arcade)

The main reason we included the crossover games in this guide is because we wanted to talk about Capcom's contribution. Simply put, *Aliens Vs Predator* for the CPS-2 arcade system is one of the most thrilling coin-op beat-'em-ups ever devised. Up to three players could pick between the cybernetically enhanced Major Schaefer with his arm-mounted Smartgun; the nimble Lieutenant Kurosawa with her pistol and katana combo; the veteran Predator Warrior with his Alien skewering Combi Stick; and the young Predator Hunter with his skull-smashing Razor Staff. A 32X port was announced but never released, and the game has remained an arcade exclusive ever since.



1993: ALIEN 3: THE GUN (Arcade)

After the success of *Alien* it was clear that the silicon-based killing machine was perfect for a lightgun game, but it took the hype surrounding the *Alien 3* movie before a developer finally made the dream a reality. Purpose-built for the Sega System 32 arcade board, *The Gun* starred two Colonial Marines sent to Fury 161 on a rescue mission. The game featured hundreds of Aliens to gun down across six stages, with highlights including an oversized Super Facehugger, a swift Super Dogburster and lots of robotic surprises courtesy of the Weyland Yutani Corporation. *The Gun* also featured a ranking system that went from Private to General.



1994: ALIEN VS PREDATOR (Atari Jaguar)

As ill-fated as the Atari Jaguar was, it still managed to deliver on a handful of good games. One of these was *Alien Vs Predator* by Rebellion, a first-person shooter that let players take control of all three species for the very first time. As a Xenomorph, your mission was to free the Alien Queen. You couldn't heal yourself, although this drawback was offset by a cocoon system that let you capture marines and turn them into a steady supply of Alien Warriors. In contrast, the marine sections played out like a traditional FPS, while the Predator was all about building honour points by using your active camouflage sparingly.

PROGENITOR

Doug Neubauer talks to games™ about the first Alien game



How did you come to work with Fox Video Games on the Atari 2600 *Alien* game?
Actually, I was working on the game (a *Pac-Man* rip-off) before [that]. I joined up with a company that eventually became Fox Video Games, [a new start-up] looking for Atari 2600 programmers. It seemed like a good idea at the time, because Fox did the movie *Star Wars*, and I really wanted to do a *Star Wars* videogame. But only later did we find out that Fox Games didn't have the rights to *Star Wars*!

In terms of gameplay, *Alien* is very similar to *Pac-Man* in that you have to navigate a maze while avoiding aliens and destroying eggs. There's also a bonus screen that's reminiscent of *Frogger*. What inspired you to make an *Alien* game in this way?
I wanted to do a version of *Pac-Man* that was closer to the arcade version. In the arcade game the 'ghosts' have different personalities and behaviours. I also wanted the look and feel to be closer to the arcade version. The intermission was just for fun and was a very simple *Frogger*-like game that didn't take too many bytes to code. When Fox saw the game, I'm pretty sure it was their idea to stick the *Alien* title on it… They wanted to change the gameplay, adding a man with flamethrower and Aliens instead of ghosts. The flamethrower changed the gameplay away from the arcade *Pac-Man*.

As it was released four years before James Cameron's *Aliens*, it could mark the first instance where multiple Aliens featured in an officially licensed product. So, were you ever tempted to call the game *Aliens* rather than *Alien*?
The name of the game was totally under Fox Games' control, and I believe they wanted to hook it into the movie they had the licensing rights to. But in hindsight, because the gameplay had virtually nothing to do with the movie, the movie tie-in kind of backfired.

Since the release of *Alien* over 30 years ago there have been lots of *Alien* games. Which have you played and and which is your favourite?
After developing a case of carpal tunnel and tendonitis in both wrists, I haven't played any games. I tend to avoid activities that will flare it up.

What did you do after *Alien*? And do you still work in the games industry today?
I think it was *Alien*, *Mega Force* and *M*A*S*H*. Then the videogame industry crashed for a few years, and eventually I ended up contracting with Atari, where I did the games *Solaris*, *Super Football* and *Radar Lock*. I actually did the POKEY [sound] chip back in the Seventies working for Jay Miner. *Radar Lock* was the last game I worked on other than an unreleased NES game; I'd avoid working on any other videogames due to the stress on the wrists and hands. Also, I haven't worked on games since the early Nineties, so I'm pretty out of date!

> "THE FLAMETHROWER CHANGED THE GAMEPLAY AWAY FROM THE ARCADE PAC-MAN"



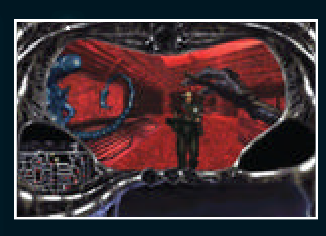
1995: ALIENS: A COMIC BOOK ADVENTURE (PC)

Not many would have imagined *Aliens* as a point-and-click adventure, but that didn't stop Cryo Interactive from giving it a damn good go. The story acts as a sequel to the *Aliens: Labyrinth* series by Dark Horse Comics. Ex-Colonial Marine Hericksen answers a distress call from outpost B54-C and must uncover the truth behind the colony's history through inventory-based puzzles and a grid-based combat system. The game didn't give LucasArts any headaches, but it was still a solid effort.



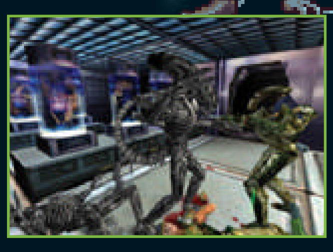
1996: ALIEN TRILOGY (PC, PSone, Sega Saturn)

After Acclaim acquired Cheltenham-based Probe Software in 1995 (and changed its name to Probe Entertainment), it oversaw the development of one of the most memorable *Alien* games to date. Released on the PSone, Sega Saturn and then finally on the PC, *Alien Trilogy* loosely adapted the story of the first three films into an enjoyable if not original first-person shooter. You played Lieutenant Ellen Ripley from start to finish and had to work your way through LV-426, blasting Alien Warriors with a shotgun and flamethrower before switching to Fury 161, where you encountered the Alien Runner from the third film.



1998: ALIENS ONLINE (PC)

Generally forgotten today, the GameStorm service by Kesmai offered multiple online titles at a flat rate of $10 a month. One of the games developed for it was *Aliens Online* by Mythic Entertainment, a competitive FPS that featured five distinct maps, including a rough approximation of the Hadley's Hope colony from *Aliens*. An XP system meant players could steadily improve the stats of their custom Colonial Marine. This was also the first *Aliens* game where you could go on a rampage as the Queen herself.



1999: ALIENS VERSUS PREDATOR (PC, Mac)

After Rebellion recovered from its run-in with the Atari Jaguar, it learned a valuable lesson: if you're going to develop a platform exclusive, make sure it's on a thriving system. With this in mind, Rebellion struck a licensing deal with Fox Interactive and began work on *Aliens Versus Predator* for the PC and Mac. This FPS kept the three-campaign structure of the Jaguar game, only this time the underlying story was much more apparent. The game also introduced gamers to the Queen-guarding Praetorians, a new Predator vision that let you spot Xenomorphs easily, and a Yautja-favouring team deathmatch mode.



2000: ALIEN RESURRECTION (PSone)

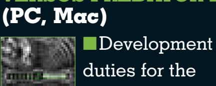
With a history that includes developing the Super FX chip for the SNES and *Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos* for the PSone, it's fair to say that Argonaut Software wasn't an unknown quantity when it began working on *Alien: Resurrection* with Fox Interactive. The result was one of the more accomplished first-person shooters on the PSone. It ditched the pseudo-3D effect found in *Alien Trilogy* and replaced it with fully 3D enemies and environments. You played as Ripley for seven of the ten levels, but the other three let you get to grips with gunslinging Christie, marine DiStephano and android Call.

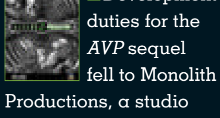


AND THE REST

2001: ALIENS: THANATOS ENCOUNTER (Game Boy Color)

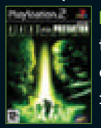
Crawfish Interactive's contribution to the *Alien* franchise was a top-down shooter where you controlled one of five Colonial Marines. If your active marine lost their last sliver of health, the Aliens captured them. You then had 200 seconds to save them or they'd be lost for good.





2001: ALIENS VERSUS PREDATOR 2 (PC, Mac)

Development duties for the *AVP* sequel fell to Monolith Productions, a studio that (at this point) had previously worked on *Blood* and *No One Lives Forever*. The game introduced new features like the Predator Energy Shift and Medi-Comp devices. It also received an expansion called *Primal Hunt*.

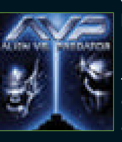


2003: ALIENS VERSUS PREDATOR: EXTINCTION (PS2, Xbox)

If ever there was a contender for the worst *Aliens* game it's this Zono Inc effort. The game went through a prolonged and laboured development cycle before eventually emerging as a console RTS. If that isn't enough to scare you off it, we don't know what is.

2003: ALIENS: UNLEASHED (Mobile)

The first licensed *Alien* game to appear on a mobile phone was *Aliens: Unleashed*. The player controlled a Colonial Marine fighting against real and synthetic Aliens on a USCM training mission. The game looked like an FPS, but the combat was actually turn-based.

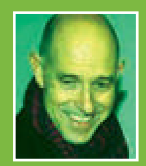


2004: ALIEN VS PREDATOR (Mobile)

The second *Alien* game to appear on mobile phones was developed by Superscape as a tie-in for the 2004 film of the same name. It was a 2D action game that let you control all three species, but was let down by simplistic enemy AI and a complete lack of sound.

BEHIND THE SCENES: ALIENS:THE COMPUTER GAME

We talk to Mark Eyles about the Aliens action game he helped to develop



***Aliens: The Computer Game* for the C64 was released in 1987, a year after Cameron's sequel hit cinemas around the world. Can you describe how you came to work with Electric Dreams Software and Software Studios on it?**
Electric Dreams was set up by Rod Cousens, who was MD at the game developer and publisher Quicksilva, where I was creative director. I carried on working with Rod after he set up Electric Dreams; I was doing game design and PR work for [the firm]. I designed the game before the movie came out, using the movie script.

The game was also released for the Amstrad CPC, MSX and ZX Spectrum. Did you work on all these versions and how do they compare to each other?
I was involved in the development of all versions as a designer. I was not coding or producing art. They are all very similar – which I guess is no surprise – though there were limitations and differences in the quality of graphics across the different computers (number of colours, resolution and so on). Also, I seem to remember that the Amstrad version had really good stereo sound, which helped with the atmosphere of the game.

The game employs a first-person strategy dynamic where you control six marines, all armed with the M56 Smartgun, and can switch to any marine at will; and the objective is to take down the Alien Queen as you move through a large complex filled with Alien Soldiers. What inspired you to make an *Aliens* game in this way?
The design arose out of the story in the film. I wanted to give the player the experience of being a Colonial Marine investigating an Alien-infested base. I also wanted to incorporate as many characters from the film as I could – so it dropped out of that. You move through the base shooting Aliens, taking on the role of different characters. Having the ability to switch between characters introduced a strategic element, and also tension, as you rushed to try and rescue teammates who had been 'Facehugged'. I didn't just want to retell the story in the film, scene by scene, but wanted to provide the locations and characters so the player could create their own personal version of the story each time they played.

"HAVING THE ABILITY TO SWITCH CHARACTERS INTRODUCED A STRATEGIC ELEMENT"

In 1986, another game titled *Aliens: The Computer Game* was released by Activision. Did you ever play it?
I played it briefly. This game was very different to the one I worked on. It took the approach of retelling the story in the film. The two games complemented each other quite nicely. In game design terms, the version I produced had more emergent gameplay, [and] the other version more progression gameplay.

After *Aliens: The Computer Game* you worked on *The Lawnmower Man* for the Sega CD and *Rainbow Six* for the PlayStation. Do you still work in the games industry today and would you ever consider working on another *Aliens* game?
I carried on working in the games industry until 2003, ending up as head of design at the developer Rebellion, based in Oxford, where I coincidentally worked on one of their *Aliens Vs Predator* games! After this I joined the University of Portsmouth to set up a games course to teach game design. I'm still doing that! Running two courses, teaching game design and development, and I'm just completing a PhD in videogames (investigating ambient gameplay), so will shortly be a doctor of games! I would be happy to work on another *Aliens* game. What could be more fun?!



2005: ALIEN VS PREDATOR 3D (Mobile)



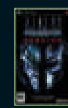
As you can probably discern from the brazen title, *Alien Vs Predator 3D* by Superscape was the first polygon-assisted mobile game set in the *AVP* universe. It took the form of a rail-shooter with a snap-to targeting system that helped alleviate the imprecision of mobile technology at the time.

2006: ALIENS: EXTERMINATION (Arcade)



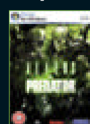
Like *Alien 3: The Gun* before it, *Extermination* by Play Mechanix and Global VR snuck a big plastic gun into the arcade and pointed it squarely at the Xenomorphs. The game only featured four levels, but that was more than enough to blast through every branch on the Alien family tree.

2007: ALIENS VS PREDATOR: REQUIEM (PSP)



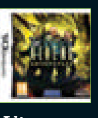
Despite finding critical and commercial success on the Jaguar and PC, Rebellion's film tie-in for the PSP was a nosedive in quality. The player took control of the lone Predator 'Wolf' as he fought the Alien infestation in Colorado. Unfortunately, the combat was basic and far too easy.

2010: ALIENS VS PREDATOR (X360, PC, PS3)



Despite being a key player in raising the *AVP* crossover to legendary status, Rebellion hasn't had much luck with it lately. The main problem with *Aliens Vs Predator* for the X360, PS3 and PC was that it didn't do enough to make each race feel distinct and compelling to play.

2011: ALIENS: INFESTATION (DS)



We're not sure why it took so long for an *Aliens* game to appear on the versatile DS, but when WayForward Technologies finally took up the challenge, it developed a *Metroid*-inspired 2D side-scroller. You start each mission with four of 19 Colonial Marines, but whenever one dies they stay permanently buried.

2013: ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES (X360, PC, PS3)



Hopes were high for Gearbox's first-person shooter, but the six-year wait ended in tragedy. Everything about *Colonial Marines* is dreadful, from its bland level design to the laughably pathetic AI. The only good news is that now the only way is up for the popular franchise. Right?

ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE BEST FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN GAMING

Being a woman in videogames can be a pretty daunting experience; chances are you're either underdressing for every occasion or being kidnapped. Things haven't changed much since *Super Mario Bros*, but that doesn't mean there aren't some who buck tradition. With Crystal Dynamics opening a new chapter in Lara's story, **games**™ takes a look back at ten ladies who have defied convention and left their mark on gaming forever.

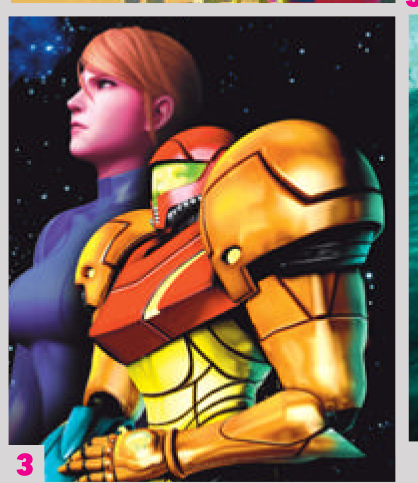


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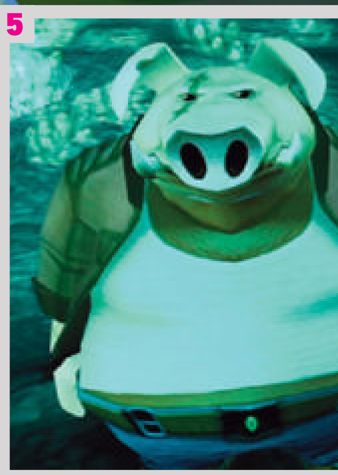
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Lara Croft
First Appearance: Tomb Raider [1996]

1 Admittedly, in the past Lara Croft's been known more for her dimensions than her prowess with pistols, but it's impossible to deny the impact that Lara had when she burst onto the gaming scene in 1996. She could shoot with precision, scale any environment and, more importantly, hold her own against dinosaurs, tigers and bears – we'd like to see Indiana Jones give that one a try. Since then, Lara has become a cultural icon and easily remains the best known female protagonist in gaming history. Lara redefined gender roles in videogames, proving that anything boys can do, girls can do better.

Alyx Vance
First Appearance: Half-Life 2 [2004]

2 *Half-Life 2* redefined many things in the FPS genre, but it's Alyx Vance that left the biggest impression after her first appearance in 2004. FPS's are often solitary experiences, with the supporting cast there to simply mop up any of the stragglers. Alyx, on the other hand, provided a human perspective to the Combine invasion that we just wouldn't have gotten from the mute Gordon Freeman. Everything about Alyx was great, from the writing and voice acting to the animation – she's the perfect companion on a journey to the end of the world, and proof that strong and human character can exist in a world of aliens and robots dogs.

Samus Aran
First Appearance: Metroid [1986]

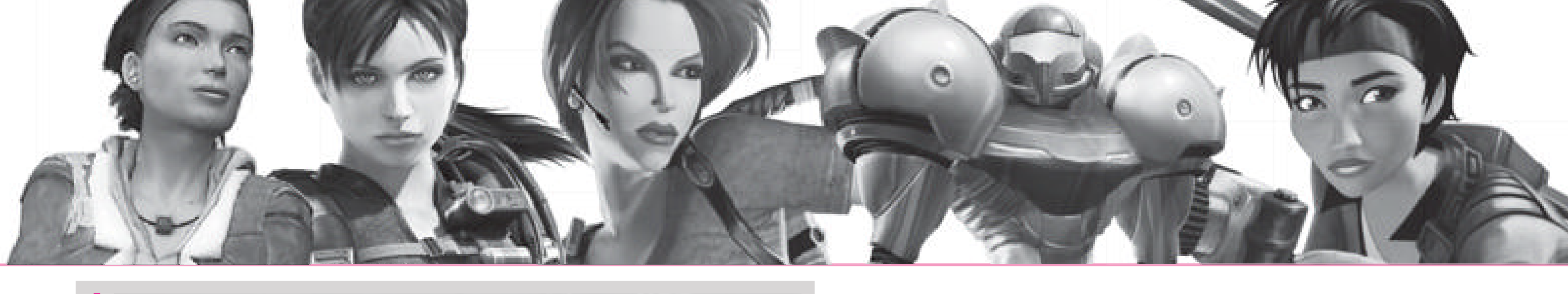
3 She's recognised as the first playable female character in videogames, and it's no surprise that her popularity hasn't wavered over the years. Taking direct inspiration from Ridley Scott's *Alien*, nobody does it better than Samus when it comes to ass-kicking space pirates across the galaxy. The bounty hunter's resolve is never compromised; she's cool and commanding even when the odds are stacked against her. When it comes to soldiers in a power suit, Samus makes Master Chief look like he's playing dress-up in mummy's closet. Samus Aran is the original videogame heroine, and still one of the greatest.

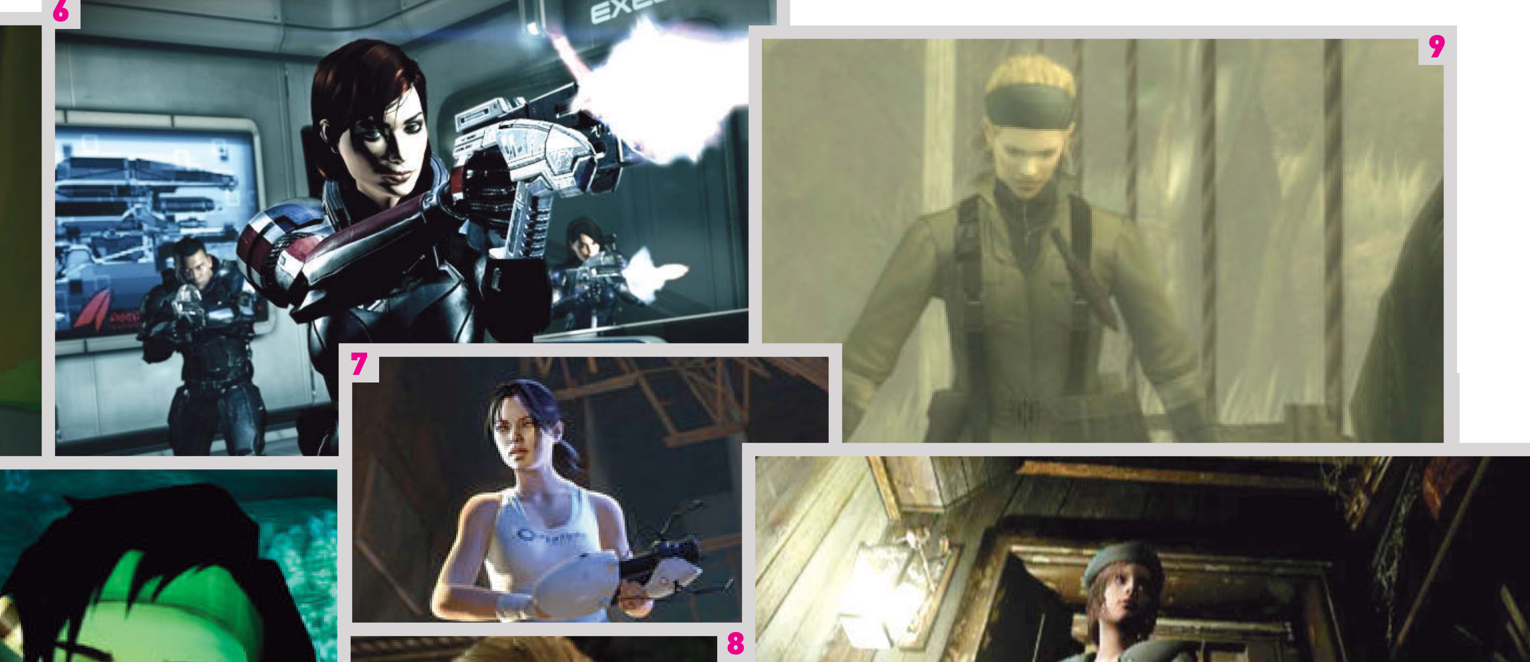
Tetra/Zelda
First Appearance: Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker [2004]

4 Princess Zelda has had more than a few badass iterations throughout the years, but it's her time spent as feisty young pirate Tetra that sticks in our minds to this day. Even with a legion of Gannon's monsters on her tail, she still sails the high seas searching for treasure and plundering ships. Not only does she kickstart Link's quest and give him his sea legs, she also goes toe-to-toe with the big bad near the end. Typically Zelda had appeared as a damsel in distress type, though through her role as Tetra, and as Sheik from *Ocarina Of Time*, she firmly put her foot down outside of the Rapunzel stereotype zone and kicked ass.

Jade
First Appearance: Beyond Good And Evil [2003]

5 *Beyond Good And Evil* never quite got the love and recognition it deserved. Critically championed, but commercially ignored, Jade is one of the best female protagonists ever to grace gaming – but nobody knows she existed. Immediately likeable, she's inquisitive, smart and brilliantly written. Her job as a photojournalist sees her quickly swept up in a resistance movement, fighting against a corrupt dictatorship. Sure, she's an accomplished martial artist, but Jade utilises her wit and bravery to get through the world. She certainly represents a step forward for heroines taking their rightful place at the front of a typical adventure.





Commander Shepard
First Appearance: Mass Effect [2007]

6 Despite *Mass Effect*'s vast customisation options, players en-masse were hesitant to experiment with the look of their trilogy-spanning commander. In fact, Bioware revealed that just 18 per cent of gamers played as FemShep (as she's lovingly known), despite being quite superior to her male counterpart. Fundamentally she played the same, but voiced by Jennifer Hale she brought far more life and personality to the role then Mark Meer's ever managed. *Mass Effect* did a lot of things right, and striving for a semblance of equality for universe heroics was a welcome move, even if she never got the exposure she deserved.

Chell
First Appearance: Portal [2007]

7 We can't underestimate the power of a silent protagonist, and Chell from Valve's deliriously addictive *Portal* easily earned her place in our essentials through sheer perseverance. Even the best of us would succumb to GLaDOS's mind games, should we ever wake up in a windowless cell in an unsightly orange jumpsuit. What's perhaps most impressive, though, isn't her various successes in the Aperture Science games, but how she managed to survive an entire game's worth of Stephen Merchant's incessant rambling. Hopefully one day she'll get that elusive cake. Lord knows she's earned it.

Elena Fisher
First Appearance: Uncharted [2007]

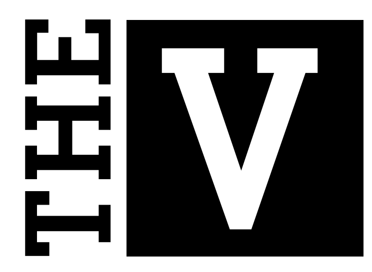
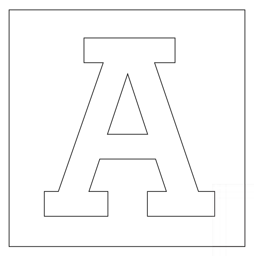
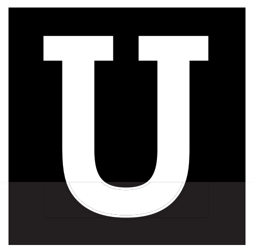
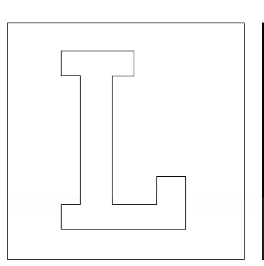
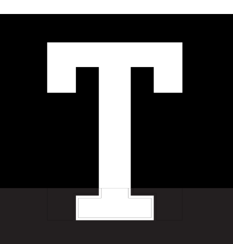
8 Never has a female lead complemented her counterpart as Elena Fisher has with Nathan Drake throughout the *Uncharted* series. No matter what crazy situations Drake dragged them into, Elena was always the commanding voice that kept us going. She has the sass and backbone to keep up with his witty one-liners, and can even throw a mean right hook. When Drake finds his back up against a wall, you know that Fisher won't be far behind to get him out of a jam. She's one of the most grounded female heroines on this list, a journalist in the right place with the wrong guy, and we love her for it.

The Boss
First Appearance: Metal Gear Solid 3 [2005]

9 When you think of women with the strongest will and conviction in the industry, it's impossible to overlook The Boss. The World War II operative is strong and cunning, shaping Big Boss/Naked Snake into the man he would eventually become. Her story is one of tragedy; forced to betray her friends and country to prevent a nuclear war, it's through her that *Metal Gear Solid 3* became a masterpiece of the PlayStation 2 era. Her exploits with the Cobra unit are legendary, and despite spending most of *MGS3* as the antagonist, her confrontations with Snake were always brutal lessons in the stark reality of war.

Jill Valentine
First Appearance: Resident Evil [1996]

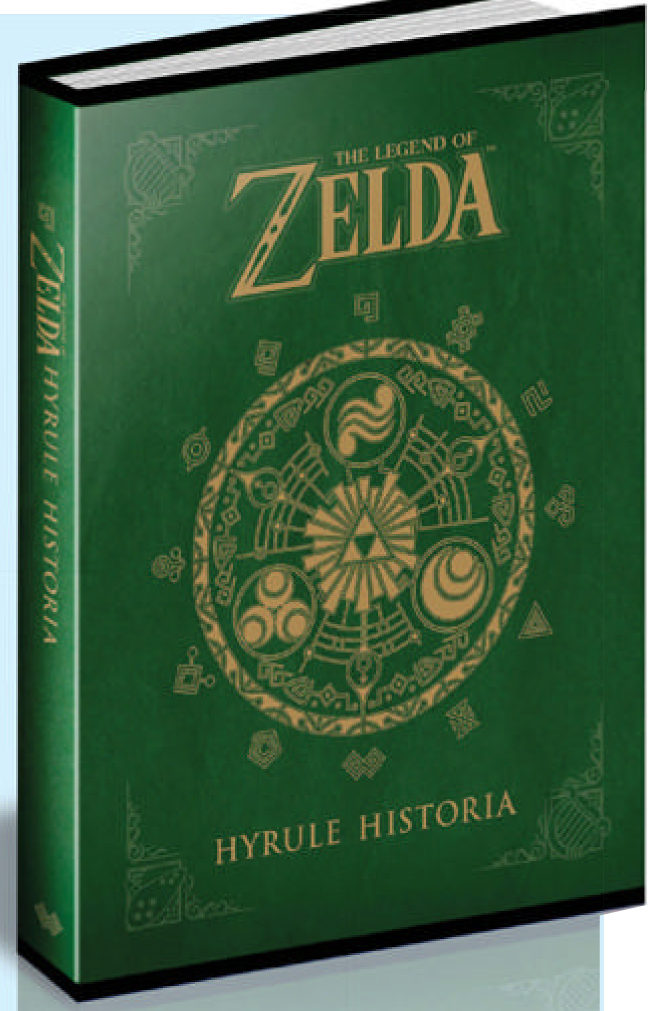
10 Surviving six encounters with the zombie scourge is no easy accomplishment, but Jill has been there every step of the way since the Racoon City incident. She's smart and resourceful, determined to bring Albert Wesker and the Umbrella Corporation to justice for the hell they have inflicted upon the world. When you think of a lead protagonist for the series, your mind might jump to Chris Redfield or Leon S Kennedy, but she's the most consistent character throughout the series. When you need an gigantic genetically altered zombie taking down, she's the girl to do it.

THE VAULT

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: HYRULE HISTORIA

PUBLISHER: **Dark Horse** / PRICE: **£39.99**



FOLLOWING ITS 25TH anniversary, *The Legend Of Zelda* fans across the world have been spoiled by Nintendo. The release of the fantastic *Skyward Sword* back in 2011 set the precedent, followed by everything from symphony concerts across the globe celebrating Koji Kondo's wonderful score to Nintendo promising HD remakes of classic games, starting with *The Wind Waker* in the fall. But it's perhaps Dark Horse and Shogakukan who have delivered the ultimate form of fan service with the release of *Hyrule Historia*.

A compendium of all things *Legend Of Zelda*, it takes readers on a journey through every aspect of Link's expansive history. Kicking off with an introduction from series creator Shigeru Miyamoto himself, the book delves into the history of videogaming's most famous hero.

This 274-page *Zelda* bible is a must-own for any fan of the series. While it's preoccupied with showing off *Skyward Sword* through much of its early chapters, it quickly dives into the complete history of Hyrule, giving us the first official timeline of events. *Hyrule Historia* also provides plenty more for fans to get excited about – including never-before-seen artwork and concept art from its franchise – before concluding with an exclusive look at the *Skyward Sword* manga penned by Akira Himekawa.

It's hard to find fault with the compendium; it's pure fan service from start to finish. Sure, we'd love to see more space dedicated to concept art and further developer insight into some of the more obscure games, but then again it's hard to complain about a book that's simply a joy to behold.









TOP THREE TEES

FROM **GAMERABILIA**

GEARS OF WAR CLASSIC

Get ready to show your love for *Gears Of War: Judgement* with this classic logo tee.

HITMAN COSTUME

Show your affinity for considered murder with this attractive white shirt adorned with a red tie.

WORMFACE

Imitate a legendary poster with your favourite dirt-based agent of destruction.

RAZER SABERTOOTH

MANUFACTURER: **Razer** / FORMAT: **Xbox 360** / PRICE: **£79.99**

BACK IN 2010 Razer introduced the Onza to an unsuspecting world; a programmable Xbox 360 controller that saw itself temporarily banned from the Major League Gaming (MLG) circuit due to concerns over the edge it provided. Onza wasn't without its issues, though Razer has managed to iron them out entirely with Sabertooth. Updating the design, Razor has added six programmable buttons onto the chassis, two repositioned triggers and a pair of rockers underneath the controller. The buttons can be completely customised to your personal play style through a handy OLED screen, which also controls everything from the LED lighting to toggling the strength of force feedback. If you're after rapid fire, you're just going to have to tap the triggers a little faster like the rest of us. Sabertooth is a great controller for the pro and casual consumer alike, albeit a little on the pricey side.



GIOTECK GC-2

MANUFACTURER: **Razer** / FORMAT: **Xbox 360** / PRICE: **£79.99**

GIOTECK AS A company has always been there for the consumer. When Sony want to charge absurd prices for an official DualShock controller, they swan in with a cheaper alternative, offering functionality that Sony's three-generation old design can only dream of. Mimicking the design of the Xbox 360 controller, the GC-2 is a sturdy if not understated controller. It has wireless play thanks to a plug-and-play USB dongle, and a healthy battery life that'll see you through even the most time-draining sessions. Like some more expensive alternatives, the GC-2 also lets you customise thumbstick sensitivity, though without on-board memory you'll have to alter it every time you turn the PlayStation 3 on. It's also worth pointing out that it comes without Sixaxis control, but if you're after a third-party alternative then you can't go far wrong with a Gioteck pad in your hands.

TURTLE BEACH XP400

MANUFACTURER: **EAR FORCE** / FORMAT: **MULTI** / PRICE: **£199.99**

AS VIDEOGAMING HEADSETS continue to become less of a niche and more of a must-have purchase, industry leader Ear Force has continuously surprised us with the quality of their offerings. The XP400 is a wonderful addition to the line, giving your videogames an unparalleled audio advantage. Despite being wireless, it doesn't suffer from any delay, and while it doesn't quite hit audiophile standards, the Turtle Beach XP400 is one of the best gaming-dedicated headsets on the market.





ATARI FLASHBACK 3

MANUFACTURER: **ATGAMES** / PRICE: **£49.99**

FOR A VERY specific section of the **games™** readership, the Atari Flashback 3 will be a welcome addition to the entertainment unit. Offering a fairly faithful reproduction of the Atari 2600 experience with 60 games built-in, this emulator whisks us back to a time of gaming gold. It's just a shame that many of those games haven't stood the test of time particularly well; you may find yourself missing your PS3.

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Director Naoki Yoshida discusses the MMO's drastic overhaul
GUILD CHAT
THE SECRET WORLD
Funcom talks changes to its modern-day real-world epic
FIREFALL
games™ delves inside Red 5 Studios' ambitious open-world shooter

SAVING SQUARE ENIX, ONE FINAL FANTASY AT A TIME – STARTING WITH THE MMO

FFXIV: A Realm Reborn

Square Enix is done with ambition. *Final Fantasy*'s debut in the MMO space with *XI* gambled on a new genre and won. *Final Fantasy XIV*, by contrast, gambled and lost, getting an average score of less than 50 per cent when it released in 2010. Plagued by server issues and gameplay problems, *XIV* was quickly pulled by Square Enix and taken back to the drawing board.

Not content with letting their vision die, Square Enix is preparing to relaunch *XIV* after an array of tweaks and optimisations. So *FFXIV: A Realm Reborn* isn't seeking to shake up the world; like *FF XIII-2*, it's just seeking to repair the damage done to the brand. This series – a series that's run for 25 years and shipped 100 million games – is simply too big to fail. How big? Well, Naoki Yoshida, the executive producer who took over from Hiromichi Tanaka, is clear: "If there's no *Final Fantasy*, there's no meaning in keeping Square Enix functioning."

Big words considering the troubled few years the *Final Fantasy* brand has experienced, with figures released by the company highlighting that half of the gamers that bought into *XIII* didn't return for its polarising sequel. So would the company really shut down if the sales didn't change?

"Most probably. If there's no *Final Fantasy*, everything else goes."

When we look at *A Realm Reborn*, we're not looking at a game that's attempting to bring something new to the genre or to the series; we're looking at something that's just going to be a damn solid MMORPG with some superb fan service. And *ARR* is the sort of MMO that you'd be happy leaving your kids with. It's learned from recent high-profile failures and it has come to the market humbly.

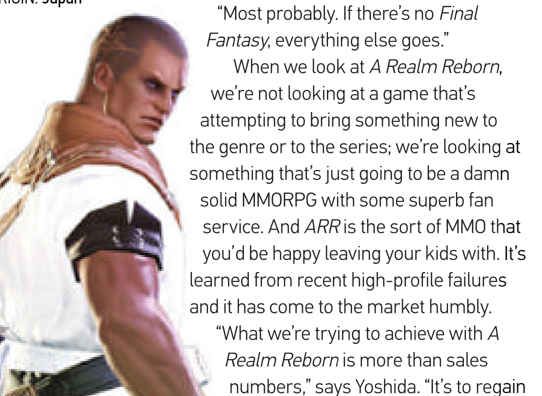
"What we're trying to achieve with *A Realm Reborn* is more than sales numbers," says Yoshida. "It's to regain the trust of our players."

Regaining that trust is going to be no easy task. *XIV* caused such issues back in 2010 that it prompted CEO of Square Enix Yoichi Wada to issue a public apology: "While more than two months have passed since the official launch of *Final Fantasy XIV*, we deeply regret that the game has yet to achieve the level of enjoyability that *Final Fantasy* fans have come to expect from the franchise, and for this we offer our sincerest of apologies."

That's all in the past now. We got a good long hands-on with the PC version and the lessons learned are clear, taken from the recent years in the MMO space. Now there's easy grouping, public quests, an efficient fast travel system, jumping, player-owned housing, dungeons, raids, PvP and a truly beautiful game world. The combat has been hugely sped up, the system requirements have been dropped, the quest structures have been tightened, and it's low on bugs *before* it goes into public beta. It's indistinguishable from a well-designed modern Western MMO, albeit with *Final Fantasy*'s slightly puerile, overly-cute characters, creatures and plots – but most fans will love that.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **Square Enix**
DEVELOPER: **Square Enix**
ORIGIN: **Japan**







With Square Enix eager to try again with *Final Fantasy XIV*, players burnt before will be happy to learn that many of its previous problems have been ironed out for *A Realm Reborn*.

"The franchise always had a huge impact ... It's very important to bring this impact for each generation."



Playing on PC, *ARR* will surely impress with its graphical prowess, though the PS3 version is a little rough around the edges.



Square Enix is committed to blending its popular RPG series into the MMO space, but with competition fiercer than ever, the studio will certainly have its work cut out.

On top of that, there's fan service galore. Familiar creatures, buildings and Summons (now called Primals) from all the earlier *Final Fantasy* games are present: Bahamut, the Gold Saucer, moogles, Gilgamesh, the Crystal Tower and chocobos.

Sure, this isn't likely to lure new players into the fold, but it is certainly a reward to fans for waiting. "It's like a thank you to our players," said Yoshida.

This remake brings back the strengths and innovations of the *FF* series. It supports players from any territory, using a huge range of emotes to enable cross-language parties. And it has true, and fair, cross-platform PvE and PvP gameplay available to anyone on PC or PS3.

This reflects Square's commitment to the PS3, despite the difficulties in developing an MMO across console and PC platforms.

"Three years ago, when the first version came out, we said, 'We're going to release this on PS3,' and we want to keep that promise," said Yoshida excitedly.

Players on both platforms can use a gamepad (thankfully with an innovative new UI) or keyboard and mouse. While the PS3 version is nowhere near as beautiful as the top-end PC version we've been playing – it had jagged edges and frame rate issues, which Yoshida also pledged to fix – but it was still a solid, polished MMORPG. Though it's not like there's a huge amount of choice on the PS3.

The beta starts on 25 February, with PS3 players joining in beta phase 3, and the open beta – essentially a free trial – starting in phase 4. This isn't the end of the process for Yoshida: "Whenever *Final Fantasy XVII* comes out, we'll make sure that *XIV* has competitive graphics."

Until then, we have *A Realm Reborn* to enjoy – Square Enix taking a brave chance at standing their ground in the MMO genre. Watch this space.

SQUARE ON PS4

DESPITE THE PS3 game almost ready to go live, we wouldn't be surprised to see it make the jump to the recently announced PlayStation 4, given the graphical fidelity *A Realm Reborn* displays on PC. "If the next generation is announced, we have a high-spec version – the PC version – so it will not be a problem for us to work on that version as well," Yoshida said, perhaps knowingly, ahead of the PlayStation Meeting. Square Enix views the next generation as an opportunity to expand, citing restrictions the company has encountered with current generation software – and this extends across all aspects of its development. "It's a good opportunity to release on those platforms," said Yoshida. "Considering the spec, if the game was completed already, exporting is not a problem. To tell the truth, with the current generation of consoles, we were not able to provide the latest game experience." We don't know what the future holds for Square Enix, but with its phenomenal Luminous still blowing our minds we can only dream as to what the next generation holds for RPG masterminds.

Firefall

RED 5'S TRIBES TRIBUTE GETS NEARER TO RELEASE – SO WE GIVE IT A TRY

Since *EverQuest*, MMOs have stagnated around an agglomeration of fantasy RPG tropes, both in the East and the West. So it's a joy to see *Firefall* emerge alongside *PlanetSide 2* and *Defiance* in a new breed of sci-fi action MMOs. With sharp-shooting action, gorgeous and varied locations, and genuinely huge battles, all three of these games are promising to shake up what we expect from MMOs.

Firefall has two things in common with *PlanetSide 2* in particular: they're essentially 3D action-adventure shooters and they're both willfully obscure. Anyone can jump into either game and have a great time blasting away, with very little idea of what's actually going on. They're also both extremely light on tutorials, so it's ruddy hard to work out what to do.

Most importantly, they share a love of accurate ballistics, despite having hyper-complicated 3D worlds. While *Firefall* eschews *PlanetSide*'s vehicles – focusing on jump-jetting infantry – it doesn't do the usual MMO behind-the-scenes magic for working out combat. If a shot hits you, it hurts you; if you dodge it, you're fine. Combat is less a matter of how high a level you are and more about how skillful you are, given the loose constraints of 3D jetpack combat.

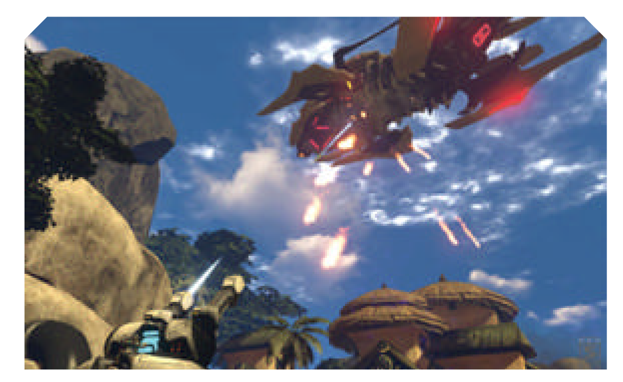
From our time spent playing the beta, *Firefall* seems to be attempting much that's new, and much that's very familiar. Though it takes place in a similar open-landscape world, *Firefall*'s seems smaller than that of *PlanetSide 2* – perhaps only ten square miles. Where *PlanetSide*'s world of Auraxis feels organically grown, *Firefall*'s overly-vertical

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Red 5 Studios**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **US**



Chosen ships occasionally assault the major cities. If players don't fight them off, the Chosen will take control and the game may well end.





The game is not devoid of character, with mock adverts and amenities for you to run past while shooting at insects.



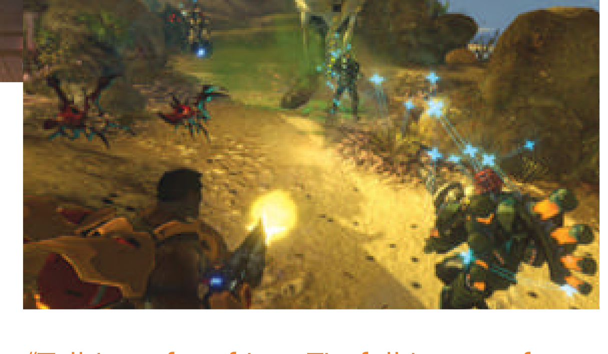
THE ESPORTS HOLY GRAIL

Firefall's PvP is entirely targeted at making the game balanced and competitive for eSports. It's five-on-five deathmatch, in a limited-size arena, with *Quake*-style double damage and ammo/healing pads. Red 5 has included spectator modes in all the multiplayer matches, along with shoutcaster controls for live commentaries, and an array of camera modes and live-rewind capabilities. Red 5 also gave away cash prizes totalling €10,000 at last year's GamesCom tournament.

The early area enemies are crab-like insectoids of varying shades, sizes and difficulties. Watch out for the giant Nautilus.

version of Brazil feels like it's been built by level designers. It's certainly beautiful in an MMO way, but it's also comprised of totally unreal bases, diners and rock outcroppings, like someone built some random assets and then tried to make a game around them.

Intriguingly, though, 90 per cent of this world is covered by forbidding plot-created purple clouds. To access these areas, players have to deploy special crafted technologies to push back the border, so they can then assault and loot to their heart's content.



"Talking of crafting, Firefall is one of the first MMOs we've come across to get it right. Resource gathering is active and exciting"



Beyond this, the game itself is much more traditional than *PlanetSide 2*, and closer to *Rift* or *Defiance*. Like those games, players select from five highly-mobile starting classes, here called Battleframes, with additional classes bought or unlocked later. There are relatively dumb NPC enemies, mounts for fast travel rather than *PlanetSide*'s drop-podding, AI enemies to grind for XP, a separate PvP arena mode (which we never managed to get into during our beta play, annoyingly) and crafting.

Talking of crafting, *Firefall* is one of the first MMOs we've come across to get it right. Resource gathering is active and exciting; several resources drop from enemies, but the best have to be gathered by prospecting an area with a great seismic hammer and calling in a Thumper – a noisy auto-miner that leaves you killing the waves of insect enemies it attracts. Even the basic resources are of different qualities; re-craft any piece of equipment using better resources and you get a better weapon.

One of our worries about *Firefall* is the lack of structure. There is a plot to *Firefall* – about an intergalactic spaceship crashing in South America and creating a pseudo-magical 'Melding' that kills most of the planet – but at the current stage of the beta it's mostly explained through a cut-scene. The plot, while initially interesting, has thrown up generic Borg enemy 'the Chosen' and little else. There are a few minor quests in the game, but why have any? Why play any of this?

Well, the caveat is that the Chosen can actually win the game. Leave their drop pods and incursions unchecked and they multiply, taking over bases. If they conquer the cities, such as Copacabana, players lose access to facilities – crafting, shops, and so on – which is a minor inconvenience. However, if the players don't unite to kick them out, the Chosen win and mankind loses... and all players are kicked off the server.

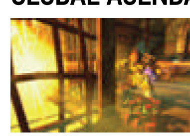
For a game that's spent so long in beta there's still a lot up in the air. PvP, for example, is to be completely rejigged so that players can no longer bring their custom gear, making it more fair for eSports. The team recently increased movement speeds and jump heights. Sadly, as often with modern MMOs, micotransactions seem to have seen more effort than most of the other elements.

At the core of *Firefall* is an exciting game that's different enough, but Red 5 still has a lot further to go to show us that the rest of the supporting material will be ready at launch – whenever that launch may be.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

GLOBAL AGENDA 2.0



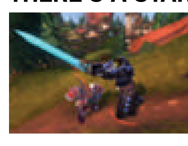
Following the relative success of *Tribes Ascend*, F2P developer Hi-Rez is developing a new first-person MOBA called *Smite*, but they're also proposing a semi-sequel for their older sci-fi shooter *Global Agenda*. *Global Agenda 2.0* will be a much tighter game based on the *Tribes* engine, introducing new classes, maps and weapons. The beta should open in mid-2013.

SHOW ME THE WAY TO GO HOME



Self-described 'sandbox/ theme park MMO' *Pathfinder* is set in a high-fantasy world and based on the role-playing game of the same name. It's non-grindy, highly social and totally anti-griefer. It also allows player-built cities. Since it's already been funded through Kickstarter there's no telling when it'll come out, but it's looking interesting.

THERE'S A STAR, MAN



NCSoft's games normally slip further and further away, but since *Wildstar* lost Tim Cain to Obsidian's Kickstarted *Project Eternity*, the game's getting closer to release. The game is a cartoony sc-fi sandbox RPG, starring the good Exiles battling the evil Dominion for control of the planet Nexus. It's looking *very* polished.

ULTIMA FOREVER



It's been an age since the first modern MMO, *Ultima Online*, and it's amazing to see that it's still going – and even more amazing to see EA producing another game in the series. *Ultima Forever* is set way before *Ultima IX*; it's based on *Ultima IV* and is focused on player morality, specifically virtues. It's not clear if it's online or offline yet, but it's good to see *UO* finally getting a follow-up game.



The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Joel Bylos

Game Director, Funcom

While Funcom's creative lead Ragnar Tornquist is Kickstarting Dreamfall: Chapters, Joel has been left with the task of managing Funcom's conspiracy MMO, The Secret World. It's still going and slowly growing. From snowy Oslo, Joel told us more

How has the shift to a pay-up-front model affected your user numbers?
The response has been extremely positive, with a 400 per cent increase in activity on the servers. We've seen a huge boost in sales of the client and the community has embraced the newcomers with open arms.

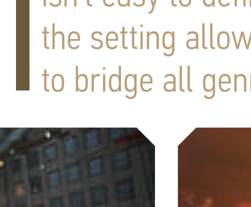
The studio has slimmed down a lot. Do you think the future of MMOs lies in more agile studios?
I think the development of MMOs will split into two distinct paths. Down one path you will have the multimillion-dollar games that try to cater to a large crowd and deliver every feature that players expect at launch. These will be limited to publishers who can absorb the shock of a failure: Bethesda, EA, NCSoft, Blizzard, etc. The other path is smaller, niche titles that deliver one aspect of MMO that people love, but neglect many of the other features that are expected in more mainstream titles. I do think you'll see more of these than the other, as the costs of MMOs are always increasing.

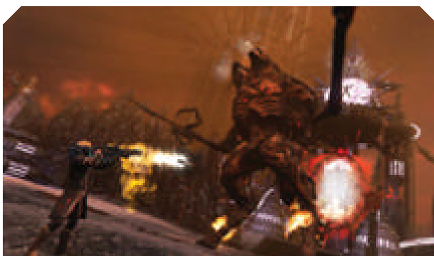
Given the speed that tech is advancing and game communities are moving, is it worth predicting the future of MMOs? How do you even plan ahead?
I've always felt like it is kind of pointless to try and predict the future of MMOs [or] games in general actually. Certainly, I don't know many designers who worry about 'future-proofing' their designs; generally we work towards certain goals. Occasionally something comes along that becomes a standard feature in all other games – you incorporate it and continue. It's easier to plan once you have established the game and what it is; from there you continue giving people what they want. People who play your game do so because they like it for what it is; you don't really want to make any fundamental changes that will drive away the people who like your game. So you give them more of what they love about the game and add features, which support and increase the game world.

> "The Secret World isn't easy to define, as the setting allows us to bridge all genres"

You've taken part in many ARGs to promote the game. Do you feel they reach beyond your established fan base? Or is that not the point?
The idea is to intrigue people and bring them into the world. The ARG is definitely both for current players and to attract the interest of new players. It isn't even necessarily the storyline or the puzzles of the ARG that I would expect to attract people; it is the thrill of working together with other like-minded people to overcome obstacles… which just so happens to be what *The Secret World* also offers people as a game.

Are you going to continue weaving real-world events into your games? What's catching your eye at the moment? Richard III?
Currently we are working on a few things that are more pop-culture tributes than actual real world events, but there are also threads of the real world involved. *Issue #6: The Last Train To Cairo* is a clear tribute to the adventure movie with a large nod to *Indiana Jones*. But then it also has elements of Roman history via the Sol Invictus cult and the Ancilia; it also includes strong references to this peculiar object (www.tinyurl.com/timetraveltomb) found in Brompton cemetery in London. The more obscure it is, the more likely we are to use it.





The Secret World is the latest MMO to be experimenting with a new subscription model. Funcom says that so far, it's working out well.



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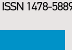
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